**Spider-Doe 2: The Black SOUL**
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# Spider-Doe 2: The Black SOUL

by doyouhearthunder

Summary

Noelle Holiday is Spider-Doe, and the whole world knows it. But shedding her secret identity hasn't made life as a superhero any easier. With her partner Kris (aka the Amazing Spider-Human) reluctant to put on the mask again, and supervillains targeting her and her family, Noelle feels alone and overburdened, struggling to balance her responsibility to protect the city with the needs of her own life.

So when an unexpected power-up finds her, in the form of a strange bond with a symbiotic lifeform, she welcomes the alien entity into her mind and SOUL. Anything to help her survive the threats she faces as Spider-Doe.

But great power comes at a great cost. And when tragedy strikes, Noelle starts to go down a dark path - one that will force her to decide what kind of hero she truly wants to be.

Notes

Hey there, True Believers! I'm back!

This fic has been a long time coming. I began writing it pretty much as soon as I finished the first one, back in May of last year. Then after about 6 months of slow, gradual progress, I knuckled down and knocked out the majority of the fic in a couple months.

The result is my most ambitious single fic yet. It's about 50% longer than the first one, and with an even more complex plot full of characters and subplots to juggle. It's a darker story in some ways, but then, these are darker times. It feels like in 2025 we need superheroes more than ever - but our heroes are struggling too. They aren't perfect. They mess up and make mistakes. They doubt themselves and question their own worthiness. It's one thing for Noelle to embrace a new role as a superhero, and quite another for her to sustain that lifestyle long-term.

That's what this story is really about - not just becoming a hero, but committing to being one, and figuring out what that even means. Suffice to say, it is not without its challenges.

As was the case last time, I want to give a huge shout-out to AnonymousBoopleSnoot for being a trusty beta reader and brainstormer during the process of writing this fic. Although I did all of the writing, a lot of his initial plot ideas for a sequel ended up making it into my final version, and he was always there to help me get unstuck when I needed a creative jolt. Plus the whole concept of this AU wouldn't have existed without him! So please give him a round of applause!

And with that, I'll get out of the way and let you enjoy the story! Updates will be every Sunday for the next 23 weeks. I sincerely hope you like what Boople and I have cooked up for you. Grab your webs and start swinging - it's gonna be a wild ride!

# Chapter 1: Dear Journal

*February 2025*

*Dear Journal,*

*All right, let's do this one more time. I keep trying to sit down and write a new entry and then something always distracts me. Just been too busy, I guess! That's the life of a famous crime-fighter for you!*

*Being famous is still super weird. And I do mean super, haha! I knew when I announced to the press that I was Spider-Doe that everyone would freak out about it, but I guess I kinda thought that after a couple months, people would stop caring? I mean, Kris is the one who's REALLY famous, not me. I was just the new hero on the block. Why would anyone care what my real identity is?*

*BUT NOPE I WAS WRONG. Spider-Doe has actually become really popular? Like really, really popular. I guess that's what happens when you're a teen celebrity superhero dating another celebrity superhero, lol. But it's still surreal. Like for example, today I saw a street vendor selling "I heart Spider-Doe" t-shirts along with a bunch of stuffed dolls - like marketable plushies? Of me??? I was kinda tempted to buy one…*

*Actually, Dess did buy a shirt of me online! I'm sure Future Me will remember this because it's soooo funny, but I'm writing it down in case she forgets. Dess keeps wearing a shirt with my face (or at least my mask) on it around the house to "show support" as she puts it, even though me and Mom and Kris are the only ones who ever see it because she's still on house arrest and everything. My sister is my biggest fan these days. It's…kind of sweet. I know she hates being stuck at home and how slowly her court case is progressing but I like it a lot more than when she was out all night stealing stuff and never talking to me!*

*Mom says I should get a lawyer and copyright myself or something so I can sue people for using my likeness to make money. But I don't know, that doesn't seem like a very heroic thing to do. I'm okay with being a plushie if it makes people happy! =:)*

*Mom also says I should write a book. "Every successful public figure writes a book eventually," she said. "You need to control your own narrative, Noelle." More like she needs to control it for me! She even offered to hire someone to ghost-write it for me, but like, what would be the point if it's not even my own words? Who wants to read a Ghost-Spider book??*

*I'm too busy to write a book anyways. I have actual superheroing to do! You would think taking down the Kingpin would mean less crime, but nope, there are still plenty of criminals and supervillains trying to fill the void.*

*But also it's just me out there now that Kris is…semi-retired? They still say they're just taking a break, but they've been taking a break for months now. Every time I bring it up they're just like "You've got this, Noelle, you're doing a great job out there. You don't need me." But I do need them. I love being Kris's partner but I kinda thought that they were going to be my superhero partner too, y'know? They haven't even put on their costume in ages. And I'm doing my best to hold the city together but I'm only one Spider. A little support would be nice.*

*Ugh. Writing this all down makes me feel bad. Like hello, I'm not the one whose dad turned out to be a supervillain! Sure, we got Asgore arrested for having my dad killed, but I guess to me that was closure and for Kris it was just a new trauma. They have a lot to figure out and I just need to give them time.*

*So for now, New Home City will just have to make do with only one Spider-Hero! Not counting all the copycats. That's the other weird thing I wasn't expecting - people keep dressing up in costumes like me and Kris and trying to do what we do! It's a whole trend! Only these monsters don't have superpowers and trying to fight crime without those is…kinda dangerous. Mom told me any time I find one of these copycats in action I should web them up and call the cops, for their own good. And I HAVE been trying to discourage it. I even posted a video on the MonsterTok account that Berdly made for me asking people to use their heads and not put themselves in danger! The last thing I want is for someone to get hurt just because they wanted to be like me. That's not how I want to inspire people.*

*Sometimes I worry about that. What impact I'm having on the world. I feel like I don't really know what I'm doing. I'm just making it up as I go along, and I'm not even graduating high school for a few more months, and now suddenly I'm also a hero to the masses and a role model for children and stuff? Like that just feels wrong???*

*I guess there are some people who don't think I'm a hero. Like that stupid podcast guy, Spamton S. Spameson or whatever his dumb name is. He's called me some VERY colorful names on his show (I don't even understand what he's saying half the time…). I try to just ignore it and tune out the haters!*

*But it's not just assholes like him. I also have real, actual enemies. Feels like every time I stop some crooks or put a supervillain behind bars, more of them pop up! And some of them are still out there, and I just have to hope I'm ready for them when they decide to*

Noelle abruptly set her pen down and stopped writing, sitting bolt upright in her desk chair as her spider-sense broke out into a frantic tingle across her scalp. It was a sensation she had become very familiar with, that could only mean one thing: danger.

But from where? Noelle quickly scanned her bedroom, seeing no sign of anything amiss. There was no one else in the room with her, and all was quiet from the rest of the house - or at least there was the usual amount of noise, the only sound being the dull thudding bass of Dess's music from the adjacent room.

But still her spider-sense prickled. And if the danger wasn't coming from inside the house, then it must be -

Glass shattered with a tremendous crash as a black shape launched itself through Noelle's bedroom window. She shrieked and instinctively ducked under her desk to avoid the shards of glass spraying across the room.

The figure that had just forced their way into her home rolled to a halt next to her bed, then stood and unfurled their wings, revealing a bird monster with dark feathers and a large black beak. He wore leopard-print pants with a belt adorned with long, sharp teeth, and a sleeveless jacket fringed with fur from…some kind of monster or animal, Noelle didn't want to ask which. The jacket was unzipped, showing off a broad, uncommonly muscular chest for a monster of his sub-species. In his hands he held an almost comically tall spear with a sharp point and a tassel hanging off it, and a round leather shield, which was now studded with little shards of glass.

*Geez, not this guy again!*

"Noelle Holiday!" the intruder squawked. "Reveal yourself! Where did you - oh, there you are." He shot a confused look at Noelle, who was in her pajamas under her desk with her arms thrown over her face to shield herself. "It is I, your arch-nemesis, Raven the Hunter! Stop cowering under that desk and face me!"

Noelle glared up at him. "I'm not cowering! You startled me!" She kicked her chair out of the way and straightened up. "And you're not my nemesis! We've fought each other *one time!"*

A battle that Raven had won, but only by scratching her with a poisoned knife. She wouldn't let herself fall prey to the same trick twice.

Her bedroom door flew open, and her mother burst into the room wearing an evening robe of green velvet, Dess following right on her hooves. "Noelle! I heard a crash! What's going…on." Carol halted, her jaw hanging open, before pointing a finger at Raven and demanding, "Step away from my daughter this instant!"

"Aw hell yeah," Dess said, stepping forward and cracking her knuckles. "'Bout time there was a fight I can get in on. Hey, Aviary Dundee! Leave my sister alone!"

"No!" Noelle shouted, holding out an arm to signal them both to stay back. "Keep your distance! He's dangerous, but it isn't you he wants."

Raven was spinning his spear as he shifted into some kind of elaborate combat stance, a maneuver that he barely had space to pull off in the low-ceilinged bedroom. Dess stared at him with a fiery look that said 'if you try to stab me with that thing I'll make you swallow it,' but she held herself back when a wide-eyed Noelle made eye contact with her and shook her head in warning.

"Nobody move," Carol said. "I'm getting your grandfather's shotgun."

"Making your mother fight your battles for you?" Raven scoffed. "For shame."

“Why are you even here?” Noelle asked, hoping to stall for time. “You won our last fight, remember? It’s not like you have a score to settle.”

“Ah, but the last time we fought it was for business, not for pleasure. I never took your antlers for my trophy wall as I promised you I would,” Raven said. With that beak of his, it was difficult to tell when he was smiling, but she could hear the self-confident smirk in his voice. “And now your star is rising faster by the day - and with it, the glory to be won by defeating you!”

“Okay, look,” Noelle sighed, rubbing at her temples - she was starting to feel a headache coming on. “If you want to fight me that badly, can we maybe, I don’t know, schedule it in advance? I’ll fight you anywhere you want. I’ll even fight you on live TV or something! But right now it’s 9 PM on a school night and I’m already in my pajamas and I still have homework I have to do and it’s REALLY not a good time!”

“Do not try to deflect me!” Raven cawed indignantly. “The prey does not choose the time and manner of the hunt! We are destined to do battle, forever locked in glorious combat until one of us -”

“YOU ARE NOT WELCOME HERE!” Noelle yelled, her patience reaching its end. “GO AWAY!!”

“Yeah, $#*& off, perv!” Dess added.

“Enough of your craven bleating!” Raven snapped. “Defend yourself!”

He thrust his spear at her, but Noelle’s spider-sense helped her see the attack coming, and she quickly sprang away, landing in a crouch stuck to the side of the wall.

Unfortunately, this meant that the point of the spear passed through the space she’d just occupied and slammed into the monitor of her desktop computer instead.

“My computer!” Noelle cried, her hands gripping the sides of her head in horror.

“That’s it!” Dess shouted. She threw herself at Raven while he was preoccupied pulling the spear from Noelle’s monitor. “I’ll show you what happens when you wreck my sister’s stuff! You get your own shit wrecked, that’s what!”

Dess’s fist connected with Raven’s face, just below his beak, but she barely staggered him. Noelle knew from past experience that he was stronger than he looked - while the feathered hunter did not have superpowers of his own, he had some kind of drug that enhanced his strength far beyond the normal limits.

“Dess, leave this to me!” Noelle tried to aim her web-shooters at Raven, but with her sister in the way, she didn’t have a clear shot to throw a net over him.

Before she could intervene, Raven let go of his spear and moved with lightning-fast speed to grab Dess by the wrist, intercepting her next punch. With a twist of his winged arm, he threw her halfway across the room. Dess slammed her back against one of Noelle's oak bookshelves, rattling it against the wall and sending

several textbooks raining down on her as she fell to the floor with a heavy thud. She gasped, the wind knocked out of her upon impact.

“Dess!” Noelle cried, jumping down from the wall and over to her sister’s side. “Are you okay? Are you hurt?”

“M’fine,” Dess wheezed. “Watch out for…”

But Noelle had let her concern for her sister distract her, and she registered the warnings from both Dess and her spider-sense a second too slowly. She felt a thick cord wrap around her neck and was abruptly yanked backwards off her hooves. “Urk!”

Raven was holding a bullwhip, dragging her across the floor towards him like he was reeling in a fish hooked on the end of a line.

For a second Noelle panicked, clawing at the leather rope choking her. Then she remembered that she had weapons of her own and thrust her hands up at Raven, her middle fingers tapping the pressure plates on her palms. The first glob of paste-like web fluid missed the mark, splatting onto her ceiling like a ball of sticky glue, but the second one hit the hunter dead in the face.

He cursed and dropped the whip in surprise, allowing Noelle to untangle herself from it. She felt very vindicated at that moment in her decision to wear the web-shooters 24/7, like jewelry too precious to let out of one’s sight. It may have felt paranoid, but you never knew when a supervillain might show up!

Raven pulled the webbing from his face while Noelle got to her hooves and helped Dess up. He screeched in pain, pulling several feathers out along with the web glue. He flapped his wing furiously, trying to shake off the sticky blob that was now stuck to his hand.

*Right,* Noelle thought. *Note to self, adhesive works better on skin than on feathers.*

“I’ll make you suffer for that, Spider-Doe!” Raven shrieked.

“Not on my watch,” Carol’s voice barked from behind her. Noelle whipped her head around to see her mother standing in the doorway to her room, holding a vintage shotgun braced against her shoulder, the end pointed at Raven. “Hit the deck, girls!”

Noelle instinctively dove to the floor, pulling Dess down with her. The shotgun blast was deafening; even Dess couldn’t help but scream when she heard it.

Noelle twisted around and looked up frantically to see what had happened. Raven was still standing, but he had pulled his shield up over his face. It was bent and peppered with buckshot, but it had held against the blast; Grandad’s shotgun, while clearly still operable, was more of an antique collector’s item than high-powered weaponry.

“Mom, stop!” Noelle shouted, her ears still ringing. She quickly aimed her wrists again and plugged the end of the shotgun with a spurt of web-glue.

“Noelle!” Carol protested, holding up the now-useless gun with a half-annoyed, half-stupefied expression. “Why would you defend this man? He’s trying to kill you!”

“So that means it’s okay to try to kill him back??” She didn’t know how to express that she really didn’t want to see anyone get shot in her own house, not even homicidal home invaders. Not after her dad…

Besides, her bedroom had sustained enough damage already without turning it into a friggin’ war zone. She hadn’t even had time to mourn the loss of her monitor.

Dess slammed a fist into her palm. “Self-defense laws cover beating the shit out of this guy though, right?”

“Leave this to me,” Noelle pleaded, trying to wave both her mother and Dess away. “This is what I do!” Normally she did it in a costume and not in candy cane-patterned PJs, but none of this was exactly ideal.

Raven lowered his shield tentatively, looking a little more wary after nearly getting a face full of buckshot. He glanced towards the jagged mouth of the broken window, seeming to realize that the odds were now three very angry deer against one, in close quarters, with firearms in the mix.

“Bah!” Raven spat. “My battle is with you, Spider-Doe, not your family. Let this skirmish end in a draw - the final victory will belong to the Hunter!”

He quickly slung his shield’s strap over his shoulder, securing it to his back, and then leapt to the window and took flight.

Noelle didn’t even stop to think, let alone grab her costume, before she jumped out the window into the night to give chase. “Oh no you don’t!”

There was no way she was letting this jerk barge into her house, trash her room and endanger her family, and then just fly off to leave her wondering when he was going to come back and finish the job. She was taking Raven *down. Tonight.*

She spun the nozzle on her web-shooters to the setting for a thin, strong strand, and shot a webline that hit Raven. The added weight jerked him downwards, but his wings were strong and he managed to stay aloft even with Noelle pulled behind like an anchor.

“So, you decided to play at being the hunter instead of the prey!” Raven squawked, and as Noelle hung there, the cold February evening wind whipping against her, it began to dawn on her that maybe this was what he’d been hoping she’d do all along. They were in his element now, with plenty of room for him to spread his wings.

She looked behind her at the house, which was already growing smaller in the distance as Raven flew over the trees surrounding the property, heading towards the neighboring houses and the lights of the city beyond. In the glow of her bedroom window she saw Dess watching her be carried off. Her sister looked like she was trying to climb out the shattered window in pursuit. Noelle could

just barely hear her shouting over the wind, “NOELLE! HANG ON, I’M COMING!”

“Stay inside, Dess!” she shouted back. This wasn’t worth Dess breaking her parole over. “I’ll be back when I’ve kicked this guy’s aaaaAAAA!”

She screamed as Raven dove towards the treetops, sending her abruptly arcing through the air on her webline. He pulled back up just before hitting the trees, clearly intending to smash her against the tree trunks.

Noelle started to climb hand over hand up her webline, as quickly as she could, but it was too late to avoid the tree branches entirely. She locked her legs together and braced herself. The tip of a tree slammed into her, the impact nearly knocking her loose from her webline. But the branches were thin up at the tip of the tree, and Noelle was strong, so she held on.

The next branch she managed to hit with her hooves, protecting the more tender parts of her body by kicking outward with the tough keratin. She heard the branch snap with a mighty crack.

Several smaller branches whipped against her sides, snatching at her hair and ripping her pajamas, stinging the flesh underneath, but Noelle kept her focus and continued hauling herself up the rope of webbing. Before long she had left the trees below and behind her, flying past the limits of the Holidays’ wooded property and out into the surrounding neighborhood of wealthy suburban houses.

Raven glanced over his shoulder and squawked in annoyance to find Noelle still hanging on. She had pine needles in her hair and scratches on her face, and she had to squint to shield her eyes from the wind without a mask to protect them, but she was very clearly determined not to let him get away.

“Holiday, you fool!” he shouted down to her. “You can’t win an airborne battle! You can’t even fly! Do you intend to drag us both to our deaths?”

Noelle looked down at the houses speeding by below them. He had a point. Her weight dragged him down to a low altitude, just high enough that a fall could do serious damage, but not so high that she’d have time to form a web parachute if she fell. And the houses around here, even the largest ones, weren’t tall enough to swing from. All it would take was a broken webline to send her hurtling to an unpleasant end.

Noelle grit her teeth and kept trying to climb upwards as he flew on, her hair streaming behind her in the wind, eyes watering. Her arm muscles, even enhanced as they were, were growing strained from the effort of holding on against all that air buffeting her.

Finally she made it within reach of Raven. The webline had hit his leg, so that was the first part of him she grabbed. Raven screeched in protest and tried to kick her off, talons stabbing at her, but Noelle tugged him downwards towards her and hoisted herself up onto his back. She flattened herself against the shield strapped to his back, using it as a flat surface for her sticky fingers to cling to. With a

quick *thwip* she webbed the strap to his shoulder, just in case he got any funny ideas about throwing away the shield with her attached to it.

“Give up, Raven!” she shouted, her words all but lost to the wind. “Bring us down and surrender!”

“Get off me, girl! You’ll get us both killed!”

He was beginning to spiral, tilting downwards into a tailspin. It was one thing to have extra weight trailing behind you on a tether, and another to have it sitting on your back, preventing you from flapping your wings fully.

But Noelle knew what she was doing. They had reached the outskirts of the city proper, where upper-class residential houses quickly gave way to taller brownstones and cramped stacks of apartments. All she had to do was point Raven towards a pair of buildings with enough space between them, and she could spin a web net in the gap ahead of them and steer Raven right into it.

But it didn’t quite work out that way. Raven resisted her efforts to steer him where she wanted him to go, instead veering downwards towards a large, dark structure, jagged steeples tucked between apartment buildings.

With a sudden start, Noelle recognized it - everything looked so different from above and under the cover of night, but she knew this place. It was an old church, the same branch of the Angel’s Heaven congregation that her family attended, being that it was not far from their home. They’d been coming here every weekend for her whole life. Even after becoming Mayor, her mother had continued attending services here, rubbing elbows with her constituents and making donations to the church’s programs to aid the poor and the homeless.

It was a beautiful, historic building of brick and stone, marked by a tall bell tower and a large circular stained glass window depicting the Delta Rune.

A window that Raven’s erratic flight path had them on a direct collision course with.

“Pull up!” Noelle screamed at the same moment as Raven was yelling again, “Get off!”

Noelle knew that if she jumped off of Raven’s back, he would fly away unencumbered and escape. But if she stayed put, they were going to crash.

With the church rushing up to meet them and only seconds to choose, Noelle acted fast. She tore the strap off Raven’s shield and yanked it from his back, grabbing him around the neck in a chokehold and placing the shield in front of his face, ducking her head behind it as well.

“I can’t see, you stupid -” Raven cawed, but Noelle cut him off with a shout.

“Tuck in your wings!”

He did so, although he had little choice at that point if he didn’t want to injure himself. Noelle held on tight as they flew forward together in freefall, Raven’s

momentum carrying them straight into the window.

They punched through all that beautiful stained glass like a bullet through a mirror, just like Raven had with her window at home, the leather hide of the shield keeping glass shards from cutting them. Only that protection, and Noelle's strong arm bearing the brunt of the impact, kept them both from being seriously hurt.

They hit the floor of the aisle between the pews and rolled to a stop in front of the altar, a cascade of shattered glass raining down behind them. It was a rough landing, and Noelle was slow in staggering to her feet. She had to reach up to clutch at the altar's smooth stone surface just to help her pull herself to her hooves, legs shaking.

Noelle slumped against the altar for a moment, catching her breath. As the adrenaline rush began to ebb, she was left momentarily exhausted. Her body tingled all over, from her legs to her fingertips to her…her scalp…

She spun around, her spider-sense screaming a warning. *Where's Raven?* She thought she had seen a flash of movement out of the corner of her eye, but it was dark in the church at night, full of shadows and gloom, the moonlight through the shattered window the only real illumination.

It was just enough for her to tell that Raven was no longer lying stunned on the ground. He was nowhere to be seen.

Then something grabbed her hair. She was yanked violently backwards, halfway onto the altar. Bent at the waist, Noelle found herself staring up into Raven's beady black eyes, his beak open in a silent screech of rage.

Raven's other hand slammed a sharp hunting knife down towards her chest. Noelle yelped and reached up to grab his arm with both hands. She caught his wrist just in time to halt the knife's fall, but he continued trying to push it towards her, pitting her super-strength against his own enhanced might. Noelle stared up at him, eyes wide, straining to hold back the knife that hovered, wavering, above her.

"You've fought well, my foolish prey," the hunter growled at her. He looked more like a hawk than a raven from this angle, looming over her like a bird of prey swooping down with outstretched talons. "Too well. For the indignities you've made me suffer tonight, I'll take more than just your antlers. I will make a deer-skin rug from your hide, Spider-Doe!"

Noelle tried to push his hand away. He responded by releasing her hair and instead seizing her left arm, slamming it down against the altar. Her resistance halved, the knife sunk closer to her chest, all the way down to the skin, the point hovering just above her heart. Only the strength of Noelle's right arm kept the weapon from sinking into her flesh, but she was pinned at an awkward angle, and Raven had better leverage.

He had her pinned down, and his strength was almost as great as hers. She couldn't kick at him when he was behind her, couldn't squirm away. Her webs

were useless when she couldn't aim them at him. She had underestimated Raven's ferocity, thinking she had him on the defensive. She had forgotten how quickly the tables could be turned in combat.

And now he was out for blood, and she was overpowered. For the first time that night - for the first time in *weeks* - Noelle felt genuine fear.

She didn't want to die on this altar. How many sermons had she seen delivered from this very spot, ever since she was big enough to sit still and listen? How many memories of her father holding her hand, their heads bowed in prayer, while her mother tried to keep Dess from fidgeting and rolling her eyes? How many times had she come here to sit in silent prayer, tears filling her eyes, in the months following her father's death? This church was her family's place - *her* place, Noelle's sanctuary. A place of safety and healing. Not a place to die.

Outside in the distance, the church's bell began to toll. BONG! BONG! BONG!

Noelle closed her eyes and whispered a silent prayer to the Angel.

"RAAAAAHHH!!"

Her eyes snapped back open when she heard a yell of fury. A split-second later, something big and heavy slammed into Raven, throwing him off of her. She heard his knife clatter to the floor.

Noelle sat up and spun around to see what was happening. It was still too dark in the church to make out the details through the gloom, but it looked like someone very large, with a long mane of hair, had tackled Raven to the floor and was giving him a savage beating, huge fists slamming into the villain's face.

"How do you like that, asshole?!"

The voice was familiar. So was the flash of teeth when the figure spoke, her gums pulled back in a snarl. Noelle almost choked, shock rooting her to the spot. *"Su-Susie?"*

Susie stopped with a fist pulled back upon hearing the squeak of her voice. The dragoness, Noelle's longtime school bully, turned to look at her, steam flaring from her nostrils. "Oh. It's you."

She sounded considerably less enthused about coming to Noelle's rescue once she saw who it was she had saved.

Before Noelle could ask what she was doing there, Raven took advantage of Susie's momentary distraction. Once more regaining his senses impossibly quickly, when any normal monster would have been stunned or unconscious, the hunter pulled another knife from his belt and slashed it across Susie's leg.

Susie stepped back with a sharp growl of pain, and Raven seized the opportunity to wiggle out from under her and jump into the air, flapping his wings as he took off towards the broken window, once again in retreat. "This isn't over, Spider-Doe!"

Noelle reached out to tag him with a webline again, hoping to pull him back to the ground now that she had a stable surface to anchor herself against this time. But before she could, Susie lumbered into her way, raising a fist up at Raven's retreating figure. "Yeah, you better run! Don't come back unless you want some more of this!"

"Susie, move!"

But it was too late. Raven flew out the window and disappeared. By the time she could have followed, he would have been out of her web range.

"Oh, come on!" Noelle shouted, stamping her hoof in frustration. She rounded on Susie. "How could you let him get away?!"

Susie squinted her already narrow, crocodilian eyes at Noelle. Even in the dim shadows, those eyes had a yellowish glint to them that sent a tiny instinctual shiver down Noelle's spine. "The hell? That all the thanks I get for saving your hide, Holiday?"

Noelle let out an exasperated sigh. She supposed she did owe Susie some gratitude. She hadn't exactly been doing a great job of subduing Raven herself before the other girl intervened.

"Okay, fine, thank y-"

"Save your breath," Susie snapped. "I didn't know it was you, okay? I just heard the crash when you freaks broke the window, and when I came to see what was going on, I saw that weirdo standing over someone with a knife. Thought he was some kinda serial killer or some shit like that."

"He might be? I don't really know what his deal is." Noelle shuddered. "I guess that'll have to be a problem for another time." She glanced at Susie's leg, where a slash in her pants showed the spot where Raven's knife had sliced her. "Are you hurt? He got you pretty good there."

"I'm fine," Susie grumbled. "Barely even broke the scales."

"Are you sure you feel okay? One time he got me with this drugged knife and I got all loopy, it was like that time when Kris tricked me into eating a weed brownie, only way wor- "

"I said I'm fine! Angel, do you ever shut up?"

"Okay, geez!" Noelle took a step away from Susie. She was starting to remember why they had never managed to have a conversation that didn't involve insults or the threat of violence. Still, it felt like she ought to at least try to make nice and talk to Susie - it wouldn't have been right to give her the cold shoulder after Susie had saved her life like that. And she had too many questions.

"What are you doing here, anyways, Susie?" Noelle looked at Susie more closely, now that her eyes were adjusting to the dark. "And…and why are you dressed like that?"

Most of Susie's outfit wasn't unusual for her: an oversized leather trenchcoat, dirty combat boots and baggy jeans ripped wide open at the knees. What was new was the white shirt with a big purple S spray painted haphazardly on it, not so much stylized as approximated, more jagged lines than curves. The other major change was the mask she wore, one of those little black ones that covered the eyes and the bridge of the snout and not much more, like what a cartoon robber might have worn.

Susie seemed to have forgotten she had it on. "Why are *you* dressed like that?" she said, throwing the question back in Noelle's face with a sneer. "Is that your new superhero costume? Too good for cool outfits like the rest of us now?"

Noelle looked down at herself, her nose starting to glow a little. Beneath the embarrassment, she felt a pang of loss for her ruined pajamas, which were dirty and torn from the night's misadventure. She'd gotten those pajamas as a Christmas gift from her dad years ago, and had worn them almost ragged already; it was past time she got a new pair, but she'd wanted to hold onto them for as long as they still fit her, if only for sentimental reasons.

But then something Susie had just said got snagged on her brain. Cool outfits "like the rest of us."

"That's why you're wearing a mask!" Noelle gasped. "You're one of those copycat hero - er, vigilantes." She corrected herself at the last second to her mother's preferred term for them. They weren't *heroes* in the same way as the Spiders, after all. Noelle had gone official these days. Technically, although the title was mostly just a formality, she was a deputized law enforcement officer employed by the city, who reported directly to the Mayor's office instead of NHPD. Carol had had to bend some laws for that one, but it was better than having her daughter be an unsanctioned vigilante.

"I'm not a cat," Susie said, "and I'm not copying you either! I'm doing my own thing."

"Do you have a superhero name? Like, I don't know, Lightning Lizard or something?"

"No! That's a stupid name. I'm…" Susie paused and abruptly changed gears, balling her hands into fists. "It doesn't matter what I call myself! What matters is that you're not the only one who gets to fight crime and stuff just because you're rich and your mom's in charge of the city. Being a superhero should be about more than some stupid neo…napa…neopetsism."

"Nepotism?" Noelle offered.

"Shut up that's what I said!!"

Noelle sighed and said, "Look, I'm glad you showed up when you did." Now there was something she couldn't often say about Susie. "But seriously, what were you doing here?"

“I told you! I was nearby and heard you wrecking the place.” Susie turned her angry gaze on the remnants of the decorative window. “Thanks for that, by the way. Now it’s gonna be even colder in here. Great job, hero.”

“I wasn’t trying to -” Noelle sputtered. “Look, forget about that! You really expect me to believe that you just happened to be hanging around this church in the middle of the night, doing…what? Looking for crime to fight?”

“Yeah? So what?” Susie crossed her arms over her chest defensively. “I found some, didn’t I? And I fought it, didn’t I??”

“I guess you did. But why here?”

“Maybe I live around here. Not like *here,* I mean. I wasn’t sleeping in this stupid place or anything! Shut up!”

“I…didn’t say you were?” Noelle said. She decided it was time to change the subject. “Hey, do you have a phone I can borrow?”

Susie looked at her like Noelle had just asked if she could hold the girl's wallet while Susie closed her eyes and counted to 10. “You’ll give it back, right?”

“What?” Noelle blinked. “Of course I’ll give it back! I’m not going to steal your phone, Susie. I just need to make a call, and, well…” She gestured at her pajamas. “Kinda left home in a hurry and forgot to bring mine.”

Susie still looked suspicious, but she dug a hand into the right pocket of her trenchcoat and produced a flip phone that looked like it had stopped being manufactured over a decade ago. “I have limited minutes, so make it quick.”

“Thanks,” Noelle said, taking the ancient cell phone without comment and punching in the number for NHPD. For once she was grateful that her mother had made her memorize it.

“Who are you calling, anyways?” Susie asked as she finished pressing the buttons on the keypad. “Your mom to come pick you up in a limousine?”

Noelle shot her a flat look. “No. I’m calling the police.”

“WHAT?!” Susie roared. “No you’re not!”

She lunged for Noelle to grab her phone back, but Noelle easily jumped away from her.

“Why would you call the cops??” Susie demanded.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Noelle said sarcastically, dancing away from Susie’s attempts to grab her. “So I can tell them what happened? So they can put out an APB on Raven?”

“That’s stupid. What do you need them for? Aren’t you supposed to be a superhero now?”

“Part of being a superhero, Susie, is working *with* the law. I’m not above it just because I have powers.”

“Sure, you’re just above everyone else!”

Noelle ignored her, jumping up to the side of the wall where she was out of Susie’s reach. The phone connected, and she heard the dispatcher’s professional-to-the-point-of-laconic voice say, “New Home City Police Department.”

“Hey, hi, this is Spider-Doe! Um, Noelle Holiday?”

“Spider-Doe, huh? Kid, I happen to know that Spider-Doe contacts the Department through her own secure line, so I don’t know what kind of prank call you’re trying to pull but -”

“It’s really me!” Noelle said, cupping her hand over the end of the phone to muffle Susie’s cursing. “I, uh, had to borrow a friend’s phone. Look, can you please send an officer to Our Lady of the Angel Church over on the corner of 88th and McFarlane? It’s not an emergency, but there *is* kind of a crime scene, and you’ll need someone to take a couple of witness statements.”

The dispatcher said they’d send a car, and after ending the call, Noelle hopped back down from the wall and handed Susie’s phone back to her.

Susie grabbed her by the wrist. “You’re lucky the cops are on their way, Holiday. If I had time to stick around, I’d show you that I can beat up so-called ‘heroes’ just as easily as bad guys.”

“No you can’t,” Noelle snapped, snatching her arm back so forcefully that Susie had no choice but to let go. They both knew that Susie had tried starting physical fights with her at school several times since she got her powers, and it always ended up looking like an elephant trying to outmaneuver a fly.

“And you *are* sticking around,” she added. “You have to give a statement to the police. That’s how this works. The sooner we do that, the sooner we can both go home.” Maybe Kris would have just swung away and left the police to figure out what happened, but Noelle had to do things properly now. She had to worry about transparency and legitimacy and all those other things her mom kept lecturing her about.

Susie’s deep purple scales somehow grew redder. “Like hell I am! Give your own $*@%ing statement, bootlicker.”

Noelle clenched her fists, staring Susie down. “You could be a little bit nicer! I'm out here every day risking my neck to keep this city safe, and what do I get for it? Maniacs trying to kill me and bullies like you looking down on me! What is your *problem* anyways?”

“I’m looking down on *you?”* Susie repeated incredulously. “That's rich coming from the rich girl!” She took a step closer, jabbing a claw at Noelle's chest. “All you do is swing around above all our heads, literally looking down at us! You're just a spoiled brat playing dress-up!”

“Oh - oh yeah?” Noelle snapped back, pointing at Susie's comically unconcealing mask. “And what are you doing then? Why are you wearing a mask that looks like you got it from the bargain bin at a costume shop?”

Susie reached up and ripped the mask from her face with a snarl, throwing it to the ground at her feet. “Maybe I’m not in it for the attention! Maybe I’m trying to do what you're too stuck up to do and actually look out for the little guy!”

Noelle had to hold herself back from laughing in Susie’s face. She couldn't believe how off-base Susie was about her. “Okay, so where were you last week when Hammerhead's gang and Kingpin's old crew were shooting at each other in the streets? Where were you when Hydro-Monster tried to flood Coney Island with a tidal wave? Where were you when Dalvius the Living Vampire was feeding off homeless humans?” She threw her arms up in the air. “That's right, I fought a vampire! That's my life now! And I don't do it for attention, I do it because people will get hurt if I don't!”

“And who appointed you everyone's bodyguard?” Susie sneered. “What makes you and your freak human friend better than the rest of us?”

Noelle opened her mouth to defend herself - or at least to defend Kris, who was so much better suited for heroics than she was - but stopped and twitched an ear when she heard the sound of sirens in the distance, getting louder as they drew near.

Susie heard it too. “You little $*%&!” she swore, looking at Noelle accusingly. “You were just trying to keep me talking! Screw you, I’m getting outta here.”

She turned to go, but Noelle stepped forward and raised her web-shooters. One quick wrap of webbing pinned Susie’s arms around her torso, and another stuck her legs together. Susie swayed for a second in surprise, then tumbled over, collapsing onto one of the hard wooden pews.

“What the f-” she started to yell, but was cut off by a third rope of webbing tying her jaw shut against her snout.

“I’m sorry, Susie,” Noelle said, sitting down next to her on the pew and trying to avoid meeting the girl’s eyes - Susie looked about ready to murder her. “I really do appreciate what you did for me back there. You probably saved my life! But you could have gotten yourself killed doing it. Villains like Raven are dangerous - heck, even ordinary criminals are dangerous. They have guns and stuff! And you don’t have powers or webs or anything! I can’t let an ordinary girl like you run around looking for trouble.”

“MRRFGH!” said Susie, staring daggers at her.

Maybe spending a night in a holding cell would be the wake-up call Susie needed. Noelle was sure the police would go easy on her. As far as she could tell, Susie hadn’t actually committed any crimes, aside from maybe trespassing in the church - and technically, Noelle had done that too.

“I know you think it’s unfair that I get to do this stuff and you don’t,” Noelle said. “And you’re right, it isn’t fair. I didn’t ask for powers or all these responsibilities that come with them, but I *do* remember what it was like to be normal, you know. I remember what it felt like to wish I could be a hero. I do get it.

“But you know what, Susie? Being a hero isn’t all it’s cut out to be. It’s also hard, and scary, and lonely sometimes, too. But somebody has to do it, right? Somebody has to protect people.”

She made the mistake of looking over at where Susie was propped up struggling against her web bonds. Noelle quickly looked away again, stung by the hatred in Susie’s eyes.

“Right,” she muttered under her breath. “Somebody has to do it.”

Even if Kris didn’t want to join her anymore. Even if she couldn’t hide behind a mask. Even if everything was different now, and nothing like she had imagined it would be at the start.

*Dear Journal,* she composed in her head, trying to tune out Susie’s muffled raging while she waited for the sirens to pull up outside. *Remember when this used to be fun?*

# Chapter 2: Another Word For Trouble

Chapter Notes

> Small CW in this one for implied domestic violence/abusive family dynamics.

It was late by the time Noelle returned home, but her family was still awake, waiting for her. Even though the police had called ahead to let her mother know that Noelle was okay, she still arrived to find Carol nursing a bottle of wine in the dining room. Dess was quietly keeping her company at the table, munching on a slice of microwaved pizza.

Carol was fully dressed now, as though she'd wanted to be prepared if she had to rush out of the house at a moment's notice - although Dess, who couldn't have left the house if she'd wanted to, was still lounging in sweatpants and a tank top. They both pushed their chairs back and leapt to their hooves when they saw her.

"Noelle!" Carol exclaimed, rushing to pull her into a tight embrace. Her mother had never been much of a hugger when Noelle was growing up, but that had been before Rudy died, and before Noelle came out as Spider-Doe. It turned out that putting your own life in danger on a regular basis was a good way to get a little more physical affection from your mom. Perks of the job and all that.

A weary Noelle sank into the hug, but it didn't last long before Carol pulled back, taking her by the shoulders appraisingly, and started peppering her with questions. "Are you okay? Did that man hurt you? The police could only tell me the broad strokes when they called. What happened?"

"Give her a minute to get settled before you interrogate her," Dess advised. "She's fine, right Noelle? Knew you would be." She bumped her fist against her little sister's arm, though not hard. Dess was good at acting unconcerned, but Noelle hadn't missed the look of relief on her face when she'd first entered the room.

"I don't know what I was *thinking,* letting you go public," Carol ranted. "Now we have costumed criminals breaking into our home! We'll need to do something about this. Add perimeter alarms to the property, hire more security…"

"Maybe some who aren't secretly murderers this time," Dess said darkly. Two of their previous security guards had been killed by the third, a human named Chara who had turned out to be not only a double agent for the Kingpin, but the person who had killed Noelle's father on his orders. When Chara had come back to finish the job of eliminating her family, only a last-second intervention from Noelle and Dess had saved Carol's life.

“We don’t need more guards,” Noelle spoke up. “I can keep us safe.” The others looked at her, and she sighed and ran a hand through her hair, discovering in the process that she’d missed a few twigs and leaves that were still caught in it.

“You sure you’re all good?” Dess asked. “‘Cause you do kinda look like shit.”

Noelle rolled her eyes. “Thanks, sis. I’m okay.”

“You should see the other guy, though, right?”

“The other guy got away.” Now that the excitement was over, Noelle felt exhausted. She slipped into a chair at the dining table and put her head down against her arms. “Ugh. I almost had him, too.”

“Pizza?” Dess offered, turning the cardboard box around to face her. Noelle reached for it and made grabby hands, so Dess slid the box across the table. It smelled delicious and oh, *yes,* Angel be praised - it was still warm.

Carol frowned while Noelle tore into a slice of pizza with an enthusiasm unbecoming of a herbivore. “The officer I spoke to said they had apprehended a suspect on the scene.”

Noelle raised her head, talking through a mouthful of pizza. “That was Susie. She’s not a suspect. She probably saved my life by driving Raven off.” Noelle had seen the police arrest Susie, handed her off to them while she was still webbed up like a criminal, but she’d figured they would just take Susie in for questioning and then let her go. Aside from being a stubborn jerk, her classmate hadn’t actually done anything wrong. “They’re not charging her with anything, right?”

“I’m not certain,” Carol said, “but I can make some calls in the morning.” She frowned again and added, “Isn’t Susie that girl from your school? The one that Toriel Dreemurr tells me has been…hostile towards you and Kris?”

“Yeah. That part hasn’t changed. But she’s not all bad, just…misguided, I guess. I think she’s been trying to be one of those copycat vigilantes for some reason.”

Carol’s expression darkened. “Another one? You need to get these people under control, Noelle. You’re an influencer now, or whatever you kids call it. If one of them gets hurt trying to follow your lead, it could be a lawsuit waiting to happen.”

“I’ve tried,” Noelle said, looking up reproachfully from her second slice of pizza. “I made videos and everything.”

“Yeah, you made videos that looked like this,” Dess said. She sat up straight, hands clasped in front of her on the table with a cheerful smile forced onto her face. Raising her smoky voice an octave or two, she said, “Hi, Spider Squad, Spider-Doe here with an important PSA! I know being a superhero looks cool and fun, but did you know it’s actually dangerous? My mom tells me some of you are being naughty monsters and not leaving the heroics to the professionals, and I really need you to cut it out -”

She broke off into a snicker at the sight of Noelle's unamused expression.

"Okay fine, Dess, how would *you* tell them?"

"On MonsterTok? You gotta do a funny dance or something. No one's gonna watch your toks if you don't dance. Or show some cleavage."

"Ugh," Noelle scowled, "you sound like Berdly. I keep telling him I'm *not* going to dance for the internet!"

"Well you're going to have to do something to make these kids listen to you," Carol interrupted. "I hope you at least talked some sense into your classmate. The last thing the city needs is more delinquents running around looking for trouble."

"Hey, it's rude to talk about me when I'm sitting right here," Dess joked.

*"You* can't get into any more trouble now," Carol said sternly. "And thank goodness for that. It's bad enough to have your sister putting herself in harm's way without knowing that you'd be doing the same thing if you could."

"Damn right I would! Noelle could use someone watching her back out there. And I don't think you understand how much I really, really need a good fight. I barely got to hit that Raven guy at all before he flew off! I'm getting rusty!"

"I can always spar with you if you want," Noelle offered. "I'd have to pull my punches of course, but…"

"Ugh, no, I don't want to fight *you,* Elly," Dess said, scowling. "You really think I'm that eager to throw a punch at my little sister?"

A playful grin slid onto Noelle's face. "Right, I'm sure that's the only reason you don't want to, and not because you know you'd lose."

Dess stuck her tongue out. "Would not! Just wouldn't feel right to fight you, that's all."

"Girls," Carol sighed, "no one's fighting anyone. Although…" She cast a critical eye at Dess. "It might not be the worst idea for you to stay in shape, in case we have any more incidents like this. You've been letting yourself go these last couple months, December."

Dess scowled but held her tongue, unconsciously placing a hand on her stomach. An active life of sports and illegal underground cage fighting had once kept her thin and fit, but after just a couple months of being stuck on house arrest eating snack food and drinking beer, she was starting to put on weight. Not a ton though, just a little more pudge than she'd had before. She looked a bit like Noelle had before the spider bite had taken away her teenage chub and given her overnight abs: curvy, but not unhealthy.

"If you want to hit something that badly," Carol suggested, breezing right past the look of humiliation on Dess's face, "we can buy you a punching bag. There should be room for one in the basement."

“It wouldn’t be the same,” Dess grumbled, looking down and practically chewing on the words. “I want to hit something that *bleeds.”*

“Why don’t we talk about it in the morning?” Noelle said abruptly, standing up. She was too tired to deal with ending up in the crossfire of another Dess and Mom fight. “It’s been a long night and I just want to sleep.”

“Did you do your homework?” Carol asked.

For a second Noelle just blinked dumbly. Homework had been entirely driven from her mind. She couldn’t even remember which assignment she had been working on before Raven interrupted. “I’ll, uh, set my alarm for an hour early and get it done first thing.”

Carol nodded, as though to say that this was satisfactory under the circumstances. “Very well. I had better stay up to draft a statement for when the press inevitably catches wind of this. A direct assault on the Mayor’s family in their private residence is going to be big news. We need to appear strong and unintimidated in order to deter this sort of thing from happening again.”

“Cool, cool,” Dess said, getting up so abruptly that she almost knocked her chair over. “Sounds like a plan. If anyone needs me, you know, not like anyone does but if you do, I’ll be in my room staying up all night using violent video games as an outlet for my aggression.”

She stomped out of the dining room, dark clouds practically visible over her head. Noelle exchanged a glance with her mother like ‘Are you going to ask her what that was about or should I, wait what am I thinking it should definitely be me’ and then hurried after Dess.

Noelle caught up with her halfway up the stairs. “Hey, you okay? Mom was being kind of insensitive back there...”

Dess heaved a sigh like it weighed twice as much as she did. “It’s not her. I’m used to her. I’m not used to *this.”* She gestured downward at the electronic bracelet on her ankle. “Noelle…you know I would have gone after you and that hunter creep if I could have, right?”

“You wouldn’t have been able to do anything, Dess. Raven flew me all the way to the church. Even if you’d been chasing after us, it would have all been over by the time you got there.”

Dess’s brow furrowed. “Is that supposed to make me feel better?”

“I’m just saying, you’re still my big sister but you don’t have to protect me all the time anymore. I can protect *you* now.”

Dess’s eyes flicked up and down, taking in Noelle’s disheveled appearance, and Noelle wondered if she suspected how close the fight with Raven had come to ending badly. Noelle suppressed a shiver. What would it have done to Dess if she had never made it out of that church tonight?

“Someone has to look out for you, Elly,” Dess said. “If it can’t be me, then who? Kris? You told me they haven’t done any Spider stuff in weeks.”

“That doesn’t mean they wouldn’t be there for me if I needed them,” Noelle said. “Kris just has a lot to work through right now - you know how hard they took everything with Asgore. They’ll be fine though, don’t worry about Kris.”

“It’s not them I’m worried about,” Dess muttered. “Just wish I could be more help, that’s all.”

“You helped us take down Kingpin.”

Dess scoffed. “I got thrown off a skyscraper and made you abandon Kris to save me.”

“You *helped,”* Noelle repeated. “I could never have been brave enough to do everything I’ve done if I didn’t have you in my corner. You don’t need to fight people on my behalf to support me, Dess.”

Dess looked uncertain, but touched. “Yeah, I guess.” She pulled Noelle into a hug. “Night, Elly. I’m gonna go shoot people in Code of Honor until I feel better, but, uh, I’ll leave the sound off so if anyone else breaks into your room, just shout and I’ll come running.”

“I’ll be fine, Dess. Get some sleep.”

“Yeah. Sure.” Dess didn’t sound like she had any intention of sleeping for the rest of the night, though.

They retired to their separate bedrooms, and Noelle was immediately hit with a shock of cold air when she stepped inside hers. She had almost forgotten that her window had been broken. Someone had cleaned up the shards of glass from the floor while she’d been out and taped up a sheet of plastic over the window, but that did little to block the cold.

She stood shivering in her torn pajamas for a minute, then decided that there was no time like the present to test out her new webbing formula. She retrieved the cartridges from the drawer of her work desk, which was where she tinkered with her web-shooters, and plugged them into the slots around her wrists.

This upgraded formula was harder to synthesize, but was designed to last up to ten times longer before dissolving. She still used her normal web fluid, which dissolved after an hour or so, for swinging around town; she wasn’t trying to be a sticky litterbug. But she’d also experienced enough incidents with collapsing bridges or falling cranes to decide that it would be a good idea to have something that wasn’t such a temporary patch job when she needed to hold crumbling infrastructure together.

Sealing a broken window wasn’t as dramatic of an application for it, but it would keep the cold February air out, at least until tomorrow when her mother could have someone come install a new window pane. When she was done, there was a thick web covering the window like huge spider web curtains, and she no longer felt a draft.

She turned on the heater, changed out her now-ruined pajamas for a fresh pair, combed the twigs out of her hair, and curled up under the covers. The last thing she did before letting sleep settle over her was to text Kris:

**Noelle:** You would not BELIEVE the night I've had. =XP

Kris was even more of a night owl than she was, so their reply didn't take long.

**Kris:** what happened?

**Noelle:** Got into a fight with that weirdo bird monster who used to work for Kingpin.

**Kris:** the hunter guy? you finally found him?

**Noelle:** More like he found me! Not much of a hunt when your address is public, I guess…

**Kris:** oh shit at your house??? everyone ok?

**Noelle:** Yeah. Don't worry, I took care of it.

**Kris:** that's my doe. bet he regrets messing with you!

Noelle hesitated, her thumbs hovering over the keyboard. She wanted to tell them about how close she had come to being stabbed, how much it had freaked her out to be reminded so violently that there were people out there who wanted her dead just for being Spider-Doe.

She wanted to tell them about Susie too, about the things Susie had said to her, the accusations that had stuck in her thoughts like burrs in her fur. Kris sometimes felt like the only person who could possibly understand why she *had* to be Spider-Doe.

Or at least, they had felt like that once.

**Noelle:** I'm falling asleep. Tell you more at school tomorrow.

**Kris:** ok. sleep well! love you!

Noelle replied with a heart emoji, then set down her phone, pulled the covers up to her chin, and spent a very long time looking up at the ceiling, feeling very

tired and very wide awake.

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“So let me see if I’ve got this straight,” Undyne said, leaning back in the steel chair, her feet up on the interrogation table. “You were sleeping in the church when you heard Spider-Doe and this other monster barge in.”

“I wasn't sleeping there!” Susie snapped.

She had been, though. It was a trick she’d figured out a while ago: The lock on the old church doors was easy enough to pick with her claws, and then she could curl up in the confessional booth or on one of the pews and sneak out in the morning when the first light of dawn through the stained glass windows woke her. Father Murdock had caught her there a couple times, but he hadn't been angry about her squatting, so Susie was pretty sure he was willing to turn a blind eye to it. And it was a hell of a lot safer than sleeping on the streets.

A lot better than sleeping at home, too.

She had no desire to explain all of that to Chief Undyne though. The fish-pig could keep her gills out of Susie's business.

“Let's put aside the potential trespassing for now,” Undyne said, irritatingly calm. “What happened with Spider-Doe?”

“I already told you,” Susie said, trying to throw her hands up in frustration and succeeding only in rattling the chain holding her cuffed to the table. The handcuffs felt unnecessary. Sure, she was big and strong and held no love in her heart for the cops, but what was she going to do, punch her way out of the police station? “You giving Holiday this treatment too or did you already let her leave with a lollipop and a pat on the head?”

“We already took Noelle's statement,” Undyne said coolly. *Figures. So it's just me being treated like a criminal.*

That was how they’d treated her from the moment the officers arrived at the church to find her webbed up next to Noelle. Even after listening to the doe explain what had happened, they had still thrown her in the back of a police car and perp-walked her through the station. It had taken what felt like hours for the webbing to melt off, and now here she was. Going in circles with Undyne’s idiotic questions.

It wasn't like this was Susie's first time getting arrested. But it was the first time she’d gotten locked in a holding cell for the crime of doing absolutely nothing wrong. And did Noelle Holiday care? No, she did not. She'd been all too happy to dump Susie off with the cops like a bag of garbage and swing back home to her fancy mansion and her warm bed that was probably like, five times too big for

her. Probably had one of those beds with curtains and shit like a proper little princess.

“This is bullshit, you know,” Susie fumed. “I didn't even do anything, except for saving Holiday’s ass, which I guess is illegal or something. Sorry officer, if I’d known I would have just let that crazy guy stab her.”

“You're not here for intervening with Noelle,” Undyne said. “In fact, you have NHPD’s thanks for protecting the mayor's daughter.” Under her breath she added, “Angel knows what Carol would do if anything happened to her. Probably have my head on a pike.”

“Then why am I *here?”* Susie groaned, racking her claws down her face. She felt about ready to start smashing her head into the table.

“You're here because of the unlicensed vigilantism,” Undyne explained. “Noelle told us you’ve been running around with a mask and a…costume.” At this she cast a skeptical eye on the big painted S on Susie’s shirt. It *did* feel a bit embarrassing now that she was forced to stop and think about it. S for what? Super-Susie? Spider-Saurian? Stupid Susie Squatting in Super Squalor?

Maybe it *was* stupid to think that she could be like Noelle. But that sure as hell didn't make Little Miss Perfect any smarter than her.

“Oh, wow,” Susie deadpanned, “fighting crime is also a crime now? Someone forgot to tell Spider-Doe.”

“Noelle’s situation is different,” Undyne said, like she was explaining something simple to a child. “Her and Kris are sanctioned by the city government, they have actual superpowers, and neither of them has a rap sheet. You, Susie, have racked up more petty crimes than you have birthdays. You're a high school delinquent who has spent the last few years teetering on the edge of a long stint in juvie. What makes you think *you* should be allowed to run around beating up other criminals?”

*Other* criminals. The nerve of this bitch. “Maybe it's just cheaper than therapy,” she said with a toothy sneer.

“They have therapists in prison.”

“You're not sending me to prison over this,” Susie snorted. “You can't even keep me in this place for more than a night without charging me with something. I know my rights. And we both know you're going to let me off with a slap on the wrist, so why don't we call it slapped and stop wasting each other's time?”

Undyne looked at her for a long moment, her gaze uncomfortably shrewd. “What's the rush? Are you really that eager to go home?”

“To go…?” Susie repeated, blinking dumbly. Then her eyes widened despite herself. “Wait. What did you do?”

“Well, we called your father,” Undyne said. Her expression was a tightly controlled mask, but there was a note to her voice that sounded less sure of

herself than she had earlier. “You know the drill, Susie. You're a minor. We have to call a parent or guardian. Only your dad, he told us you haven't been home in over a week. And when I asked why he hadn't filed a missing persons report, he… well, let's just say he dodged the question.”

Susie felt her heart thudding faster in her chest with every word. She tugged at the handcuffs around her wrists, more out of instinct than rational thought, only now truly feeling trapped. But there wasn't any way out, and she already knew what would happen next.

“He's coming, isn't he?” She kept her voice guarded, level and emotionless, like she always instinctively did when she was trying to sound less like herself. Less irritating. “My dad's coming here to get me.”

Undyne nodded, frowning at the change in Susie. Then she leaned in closer, lowering her voice. “What aren't you telling us, Susie? Why aren't you going home after school? If you're in trouble, I can help you.”

Trouble…hah. Trouble wasn't the right word for it. *Trouble* had been what had made her decide that she'd be better off trying her luck on the streets than staying in that apartment for a minute longer. Trouble had been something that had healed after a few days, and thankfully hadn't left any visible scars. What she was in for if she went back - and she had sworn she would *never* go back - was something else.

What was another word for ‘totally $@#*ed’? Susie wasn't great with words, but she knew enough to know when a word was too small or too big for her. Words like *trouble* or *hero.*

“Don't want your help,” Susie sneered. “If you wanted to help me, you could have just left me alone.”

“Susie…” Undyne started to say, but Susie slammed a fist into the table, a loud bang that bounced off the white cinderblock walls.

“&@$* you,” Susie seethed, because why not get all that anger out now, while she still could? Wasn't like Undyne could do any worse to her than she already had. This was all Holiday’s fault anyways. “And #&^$ this bullshit.”

Undyne sighed, pushing back her chair and standing up. “All right, kid. If that’s the way you want to play it.”

Susie smiled, a great big grin splitting her face from ear to ear. “Yeah. You know, maybe you're right. Being a hero just isn't for me. The next time you want to arrest me, *Chief,* I’ll make sure I’ve done something to actually deserve it.”

Undyne left the room, and didn’t even slam the door on her way out, which made Susie even madder. Used to be she could get under the Chief’s scales a lot easier. Now Undyne just seemed tired of her.

Susie screamed her frustration, slamming her fists into the steel table hard enough to leave a small dent, but no one came back in to tell her to cut it out. The seconds ticked into minutes on the clock above the door, around and around, as

her anger ebbed away, replaced by cold dread squeezing her insides like a snake coiled around her stomach.

She was tense and on edge by the time she heard the latch on the door click, and the sound made her stiffen like a scared animal trying to stay still enough to avoid a predator's searching eyes. Not that she exactly blended in with her surroundings, cuffed to a table under the glare of the fluorescent lights with nowhere to hide.

Then Undyne was leaning over to unlock the cuffs from her wrists. "Come on. Time to go."

Susie rubbed at the raw scales of her wrists, but made no move to stand up. Wild, desperate thoughts pinballed through her head. What if she just got up and socked Undyne right in the jaw? Then they'd have to lock her up, right? They can't just let you go home after you assault an officer.

She slowly stood up, hands clenching into fists, and turned around.

He was there, in the doorway. Watching her. Before Susie could react, her father stepped quickly forward and caught her in a tight hug, strong reptilian arms squeezing her. "Susan! I was so worried about you! Where have you been?"

Susie froze, not returning the hug, all her muscles locked up. Her nostrils were full of the smell of him, cigarettes and cheap cologne. Beer on his breath, same as always. She knew better than to say anything. The concern in his gruff voice sounded so fake to her ears, so overacted. When he finally pulled back to look her in the face, none of what he was putting in his voice was visible in his glinting yellow eyes.

*Dear old dad,* she thought grimly. His snout was longer than hers, his scales more reddish in hue, like bloodstained river clay. He was bald as an alligator, a far cry from her tangled mane of hair. He was dressed in a rumpled coat thrown over a beer stained wife beater and shorts, like he'd barely even bothered getting dressed to come get her. And why should he have? You don't get dressed up to go garbage collecting.

What Susie would have given to have never seen his ugly mug again. She should have been so lucky. Best she could do now was to keep her cool and not let on how she was feeling. She tried to slow her racing heart and calm her nerves. Nothing out of the ordinary here. Nothing she hadn't been dealing with for years, anyways. Sure, she'd never run away from home for this long before, but…

Her father narrowed his eyes and Susie gulped. Was it too late to punch out Undyne and get properly arrested?

Her dad turned back to Undyne and even though she couldn't see it, Susie could tell that his whole expression had changed. "I can't thank you enough for finding her, Chief, I've been looking everywhere for this little troublemaker."

Undyne, to her credit, looked unconvinced. "Uh huh. I'm sure. Tell me, Mr. Thompson, your daughter run away from home often?"

“No, never.” He glanced over his shoulder at Susie, as if daring her to contradict him. “Susan’s a troubled child, we both know it, but she’s never been so… reckless before. I blame those so-called ‘superhero’ children on TV, putting dangerous ideas in everyone’s heads. My girl goes to school with them, did you know that? I don’t know how they can still let those kids stay in school knowing what they’re doing. They should be the ones being hauled in here like criminals, not my daughter.” He cut himself off quickly, drew a breath, and put on his smile again. “Well. Anyways. I’m just grateful that she’s safe.”

*Like hell you are,* Susie thought. He was angry, she could tell. She had embarrassed him again, making him come down here. For a deadbeat piece of shit, her father sure was prideful. If only that were the worst of his sins.

Undyne gave him a thin smile. “Let’s not keep you folks any longer. Follow me and we’ll get all the release paperwork signed so you can be on your way.”

Her dad kept a tight grip on her arm the whole way out of the room and down the hall to the front desk. Susie didn’t try to shrug him off like she would have with anyone else. She knew the drill by now. *Don’t struggle, don’t make a scene in public. That’ll only make it worse later on.*

The rest passed like a blur. She kept her head down, oblivious to the world around her, fighting with the feeling of panic in her chest, blood pounding in her ears. She didn’t watch her dad sign the forms, didn’t notice the odd looks Undyne was giving her or the way the cop’s eyes followed them out the front entrance and onto the street. The only thing that snapped her back into focus was the forceful slam of the car door as her dad got in the driver’s side, Susie in the back seat out of reach. The sound made her flinch.

“Dad, I’m -”

“Save it,” he growled, “for when we’re home. We’ll have a nice long talk then.”

*There you are,* she thought. As soon as no one was looking, the real him stopped hiding. No warmth in his voice anymore. Only wrath.

For the thousandth time, Susie wondered what she’d done to make her own dad hate her so much. It couldn’t have been that she reminded him of the wife he’d driven away. Her mother had been good, and kind, and beautiful. Nothing like her. Susie didn’t remember a lot about her mom, but she remembered that much.

She suspected it was the opposite problem. Her dad had wanted a daughter who grew up to make him feel like he’d done something worthwhile with his life, and instead he’d gotten an ugly overgrown freak with anger issues and a chip on her shoulder. But whose fault was that? She was only following his example. Mom wasn’t around anymore to give either of them a reason to restrain their worst selves.

Susie figured that the world was a pretty %#*$ed up place. She’d heard about Noelle’s father dying - everyone at school had. The rich girl had been skating off sympathy for that for a while before she ever became famous. But Susie’s mom wasn’t dead, so no one gave a shit that she was also from a broken home. No

sympathy for kids whose parents up and abandoned them. And Noelle's remaining parent was the mayor, and Susie's was a miserable old loser with a drinking problem, so guess who was still coming out ahead there?

It had started raining while she was in custody; now the water was running in little tracks down the car windows, obscuring her blurry view of the city lights outside. Susie shrunk in on herself in the back seat as her dad put the car into gear and squealed out of the parking lot. He had lit a cigarette, but he kept the windows up, and soon the whole car was hazy with foul-smelling smoke. Smelled like home, in the worst way possible.

She managed not to cough, though. Susie was used to ingesting his second-hand poison. She just hoped it killed him first.

# Chapter 3: The New Girl

Kris Dreemurr rode the bus to school these days.

For years, they had only pretended to do so. Their mother would insist on driving them down the street to the bus stop, but as soon as Toriel was out of sight, they would duck into the nearest alley, strip down to the costume they wore concealed under their clothes, and set off swinging through the city on their webbing as the Amazing Spider-Human. It was the fastest way to travel by far, and they could use the time they saved on transit to get in a little patrolling through the neighborhood, maybe stop a robbery or a mugging or two, or rescue someone's cat stuck in a tree. There was always something going on in the city, some person or another who could use their help, and Kris spent all day in class itching to get back out there where they were needed.

But now they rode the bus, and spent the slow, boring commute reading their textbooks, double-checking their homework assignments from the night before, and trying to ignore the way every other student on the bus whispered behind their back.

Kris didn't know what they were all staring at. They were doing their best to be as uninteresting as possible. They didn't tell stories about their adventures fighting Electron or Terrorantula. They didn't give autographs or do tricks with their webbing or show off how they could stick to the ceiling. They just kept to themself and kept their head down, just like they always had before their secret was outed and they became famous. And yet despite Kris's outward normalcy, their classmates still seemed a little in awe of them. Like they were cool and mysterious and intimidating, instead of just a 5-foot-nothing human in an oversized sweater who had been considered a weirdo Quiet Kid a few short months ago.

At least Noelle wasn't riding with them - as much as they would have enjoyed getting to spend that extra bit of time with her each day, she preferred to websling to school, and Kris could hardly blame her. Besides, she would have drawn even more attention to them. Noelle actually enjoyed her fame, or at least was a good sport about it. When fans approached her on the street, she was all smiles, putting the "friendly" in friendly neighborhood Spider-Doe. Kris didn't mind it, because the distraction Noelle provided allowed them to fade into the background, where they were more comfortable. But it would have been hard to do that on the bus every day.

They did get someone to talk to later though, about halfway down the bus's route between their house and the school, when Berdly got on. Lately, that usually went like this:

Berdly gets on the bus and immediately hones in on Kris, who is always sitting in the back corner, as far from other people as possible. Berdly loudly proclaims something like "Aha, there they are! Fancy meeting my professional colleague and close personal friend Spider-Human here!" Kris yanks him down into the

empty seat next to them and reminds him for the hundredth time not to call them Spider-Human in public. Berdly, apparently unable to grasp that Kris is being serious, makes a joke about how their secret is safe with him, complete with a comically exaggerated wink. Berdly then proceeds to spend the rest of the bus ride chattering about how his new job at Gastcorp is going while Kris slowly gives up on being able to get any more studying done.

Today though, as the bus pulled up to Berdly's stop and Kris braced themself for the deluge of words their ears were about to be subjected to, they noticed that Berdly wasn't alone. He was chatting to a girl Kris hadn't seen before, a bird monster like him. Her feathers were a similar shade of blue, but she had more feathery wings, a smaller beak, and a shock of messy blue hair with strands sticking up here and there. She wore yellow boots, jeans and a simple white sleeveless shirt, and around her neck was a tuft of dark blue feathers that looked almost like a poofy scarf. She had a backpack slung over her shoulders with a bunch of pins stuck to the straps and sides; Kris caught a glimpse of a couple pride flags among them, familiar patterns of pink and blue.

Even as the bus pulled up, the girl's attention was on Berdly. He was saying something to her that Kris couldn't hear, and she was *laughing,* not a polite 'ha ha wow that's so funny' kind of laugh accompanied by the nervous glances of someone looking for an escape route, but a genuine smile lighting up her face. Kris frowned. Had Berdly gone and found a girlfriend without telling them? That seemed implausible on multiple levels.

The two bluebirds got on the bus, and Kris watched with interest as Berdly marched them directly to the back where Kris was sitting. "You thought I was telling tall tales, my fair feathered friend?" Berdly was saying to the girl as they approached. "Well, behold! Berdly Cristata is a man of his word!"

"Berdly," Kris said slowly, glancing back and forth between them. The girl had gone wide-eyed, staring at Kris with her beak hanging open and her feathers fluffed up. If she had been any more starstruck her eyes would literally have started to sparkle. Kris wondered if they would ever get used to being looked at like that. "Who's your friend?"

"This is -" Berdly began, but he was interrupted by the bus driver shouting from the front of the vehicle.

"No standing when the bus is in motion! Take a seat back there already!"

Berdly plopped into the seat next to Kris, throwing a wing over Kris's shoulders and pulling them into a chummy side-hug. "Good morning, Kris ol' buddy ol' pal! This is - "

"M-Martlet!" the girl chirped. She had settled into the seat to Berdly's left, but was leaning across him to stare directly at Kris. "I'm n-new. Just moved here! Um…are you really…" She put a winged hand over her mouth, like she was afraid to say any more. Like part of her was worried she might be getting pranked, and could end up looking foolish. It was kinda cute, enough to dampen Kris's annoyance at Berdly shamelessly using them as a prop to impress a girl.

They put on an airy dramatic tone and said, “I have many names…” before dropping their voice to their usual understated casual tone and adding, “but yeah, people used to call me Spider-Human.” The latter word still sent an uncomfortable twinge through them, but they hid it well enough, and if the others picked up on their use of the past-tense, they didn’t show it either. Martlet was too awed to notice, and Berdly was too busy watching Martlet’s reaction, which was to clasp her hands together in glee and make an excited series of unintelligible chirps like a parakeet.

“Oh my gawd!” she stammered when she’d composed herself enough to form actual words. “It really is you! I’ve seen your face on the news of course, and I heard you went to my new school, but I never thought I’d get to meet you so soon!” She unzipped her backpack and began to dig around inside it for something. “Hang on, I’m sorry, I just have to…real quick…oh, come on featherbrain, where did you put it?? Aha!”

Kris watched in awkward trepidation as the excited bluebird pulled out a pen and a notebook. The top of the notebook was crowded with sticky note tabs, color-coded by a system that Martlet probably understood but that just looked like rainbow-colored grass to Kris’s eyes.

“Ah, sorry, I don’t really do autographs,” they tried to explain as she flipped it open to a particular page, momentarily holding the pen in her beak. “I have terrible handwriting, it’d just be a weird scribble that doesn’t even look like my name. Not really worth anything…”

“Oh!” Martlet exclaimed, her eyes going wide again. “No no no, that’s okay! It’s not that, I just…” She rushed to make a mark across the page and then held up the notebook as she explained, “I just had to cross it off my list before I forgot!”

Kris leaned in across Berdly’s lap to examine the page. Unlike theirs, Martlet’s handwriting was very nice, a tidy cursive calligraphy full of swoops and curls. Every bit of negative space on the page was covered in doodles of flowers and curving spirally patterns, which made it a bit hard to parse visually, but she had written “FIRST DAY OF NEW SCHOOL” across the top of the page, and below it a list:

1. Set alarm for 7 o’clock sharp!
2. DON’T SLEEP THROUGH ALARM
3. Breakfast! :D
4. Catch the bus!
5. First period!
6. Lunch! :D
7. Second period!

And so on and so forth. There were bullet-point subheadings under each period for all the classes she was taking, and the first four items on the list were already crossed out. Kris’s eyes naturally skipped ahead, down to two later items in their own section towards the bottom labeled “LONG-TERM GOALS.”

One read “Make a friend.” She had crossed this out and written next to it in blue ink, “BERDLY! C:”. The other read “Meet Spider-Human???” This was freshly

crossed out. Kris watched as she took the notebook back and added several exclamation points to the end of that line.

Berdly chuckled, looking at the bemused expression on Kris's face. "Martlet has extremely good organizational skills. Almost as thorough as my own note-taking! Why, with such attention to detail, I'm sure she'll have no trouble becoming the second highest-performing student in our class!" Neither Berdly nor, thankfully, Martlet appeared to read any insult into this remark.

"It just helps me remember everything I have to do," Martlet said, blushing slightly. "Otherwise I get all…scattered." She waved her left wing in a circle to indicate scatteredness, like thoughts spiraling up into the clouds and forgetting to come back down. "Ohmygod enough about me though! Look at me, meeting a celebrity and talking about myself! I'm so sorry!"

"Um, you're all good," Kris said. "I'm not really a celebrity anym- Ow! Berdly, what the hell!" Berdly had leaned over and pecked them on the shoulder.

"Modesty is one of my superheroic friend's biggest powers!" Berdly said loudly, forcing out a laugh. "You must understand, they didn't choose fame. Kris's only goal is to make our fair city a better, safer place - a goal in which I have supported and aided them every step of the way. Isn't that right, Kris?"

"Yeah, um, right," Kris said. "Berdly's been a big help."

It wasn't really a lie or anything. For ages, Berdly had been the only one who knew Kris's secret, and had been helping them on their adventures, if only in a support role from the safety of his ergonomic gaming chair. But he *was* a half-decent hacker, and his computer skills and his excitable voice in Kris's ear had guided them through many a sticky situation that they might not have known how to handle without backup. He'd even helped them and Noelle take down the Kingpin. So Kris figured that if all Berdly asked in return was for Kris to play winghuman once in a while, it was the least they could do.

Even if they thought that Berdly introducing a cute girl to his much cooler and more famous friend was a weird way to go about it. The dumbass was lucky they were already taken, because Martlet was looking at them like she was already a little bit in love. Not that they would have dated anyone who only wanted them for Spider-Human anyways.

"So, um, how long have you two known each other?" Kris asked.

"Oh!" Martlet checked a watch on the skinny part of her wrist, just above the plume of feathers; an expensive-looking golden one, Kris noted, much fancier than the rest of her wardrobe. "About 15 minutes!"

"We just met at the bus stop," Berdly explained. "But apparently we're neighbors now!"

"Berdly was telling me about his VR headset!" Martlet chirped excitedly. "We're going to hang out after school today and play games on it!"

“That’s, um, that’s great,” Kris said. They elbowed Berdly teasingly. “It’s about time this guy started making some friends.”

“Ahaha, don’t be silly, Kris!” Berdly chattered. “I have lots of friends. Like you!”

Kris nodded.

“And Noelle, aka Spider-Doe!”

“Sure.”

“And, um, and Jockington!”

Kris shrugged.

“Snowy?”

“Debatable.”

“Well, there’s also…Catti?”

*“Highly* debatable.”

“I’m very popular at school,” Berdly reassured Martlet.

“Oh gosh, I mean you must be, right? You’re friends with Spider-Human!” Martlet was still staring at Kris. “So, um, Kris. Can I call you Kris? Gosh, this feels so surreal! I just have to ask…what was it like to fight Doctor Cephalopod?”

Kris had to suppress a smile at the look on Berdly’s face as their friend’s tactical error finally began to dawn on him. They put their feet up on the back of the empty seat in front of them and stretched out lazily. “Well, I remember this one time…”

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Fifteen minutes later, the bus pulled up in front of East Monsterhatten High. Kris hadn’t stopped telling Spider-Human stories to Martlet the entire time; she ate them up like birdseed, hanging on their every word. They wouldn’t normally have liked to talk about themself that much, but it was funny to watch Berdly trying to break into the conversation with shouts of “I remember that!” or “I helped with that one!”

After hopping off the bus, they took a quick moment to compare class schedules. “What do you have for first period?” Kris asked Martlet.

She consulted her planner. “History, with a Mr. Gerson.”

“Oof,” Kris said sympathetically. “Good luck staying awake.”

Martlet’s feathers drooped a bit. “Why, is he boring?”

“Not really, he’s just old. Talks reeeeeeeallllll slooooooow.”

“That’s okay!” Martlet said cheerily. “I’ve already had my excitement for the day.”

“We’ll see you at lunch, Kris, okay?” Berdly interjected. He looked relieved to finally be able to peel his new friend away from his old one. “Come on Martlet, I’ll show you around.”

“Sounds good,” Kris said. “I gotta go find Noelle before class starts.” They’d gotten so caught up relieving their past adventures for an enrapt audience that they’d almost forgotten Noelle had recent adventures of her own to catch them up on.

Martlet let out a little gasp and covered her mouth with her wings. Kris glanced at her. “What?”

“I just realized,” she squealed, hopping up and down from one foot to the other in an excited little dance. “You can introduce me to Spider-Doe!”

“Haha, yeah, I’m sure she’ll love to meet you!”

“R-Really?” Martlet whispered. “I am her *biggest* fan! Ohhhh, this is the best day of my life!”

She flapped her wings and practically flew up the stairs to the school, Berdly running to keep up with her.

Kris chuckled, making their way inside at a more leisurely pace. Martlet’s enthusiasm was contagious, and the interaction had put them in a good mood. She reminded them of how Noelle used to fangirl over Spider-Human, before she knew the costumed hero was her best friend. It had been *so* hard to keep a straight face back then. They had teased her about her celebrity crush so relentlessly that it was a miracle she hadn’t killed them with her bare hands when she finally found out what they’d been keeping from her. Of course, she’d had her own secrets by that point. And somehow, they had ended up dating each other, so it had all worked out okay in the end.

*The end for you, maybe. Not for her.*

Telling all those stories to Martlet had felt weird. They had been trying not to let themself think too hard about their past adventures, afraid that reminiscing would make them miss it. But now they found that they were feeling pretty okay with discussing Spider-Human as a thing of the past, a period of their life that they could look back on fondly, but not have any desire to resume. And yet, Martlet and Berdly still seemed to think of them as a superhero - present tense, implied future tense as well. They still got the same vibe from Noelle, as well; they hadn’t figured out how to talk to her about it yet, how to make her understand.

The only person they had confided in so far was their brother, and Asriel was out of the city now, having transferred to a specialized art school on the other side of the country to pursue his new major in game design. Which meant that in their daily life, it was hard not to feel like they were living a lie. Like their friends all expected them to be someone they weren't anymore.

"Hey! Hey, Kris!" *Speak of the angel.* Noelle's voice cut through their thoughts like sunlight melting snow, and they turned to see her hurrying down the hallway towards them. She practically threw herself at them, enveloping them in a hug; Kris had to brace themself against the floor with their super-strength to keep from getting bowled over.

"Oof! Hey yourself!" Kris said, hugging her back while the flow of students parted around them like they were rocks in a river. Noelle's hugs felt like getting crushed by Doctor Cephalopod's tentacles, but they could take it. "Wow, someone's glad to see me."

They pulled away from the hug to look at Noelle. She looked exhausted; her eyes were bloodshot, and there were tangles in her hair like she hadn't even had the energy to comb it out all the way, which was unusual for her. She was growing out her undercut a little, her golden hair cascading down one side of her head like a waterfall, but the other side still had close-cropped hair along her scalp under the longer locks. Kris stood on their tiptoes and rubbed gentle circles into that short patch of fuzz. It was very texturally pleasant to touch, and Noelle liked it too; she gave a contented little sigh and relaxed against their shoulder.

"Rough night, huh?"

"The worst," Noelle mumbled.

"Want to tell me about it?" Kris asked, but just then the bell rang.

"Later," Noelle said. "It can wait until after class." She frowned at them. "First period today is Chemistry. Shouldn't you already be there to help T.A. for Ms. Alphys?"

"Crap!" Kris swore. "I totally forgot." They'd been Alphys's Teaching Assistant for a few weeks now. Not because they wanted the attention or because they were particularly good at chemistry, but because they'd struck a deal where the T.A. gig would get them some extra credit to make up for all their superhero-related absences. Their grades had been steadily improving since they stopped heroing, but they were still in the proverbial red and needed every credit they could get.

"You'd better get going," Noelle said, but she let them hop up on their toes for a quick kiss first.

"Thanks you're the best Noelle see you there!" Kris said in a rush, sprinting down the hall towards the bio lab.

They skidded to a halt in front of the classroom and slammed the door open. "Ms. Alphys! Sorry I'm late!"

For a second it was quiet enough to hear a pin drop, as everyone looked up from their tables to stare at Kris. Jockington's expression was unreadable behind his sunglasses, but Snowy was holding back laughter, and Catti had actually looked up from her cell phone, a rare ghost of a smirk on her normally impassive face.

"K-Kris!" Alphys stammered. "I was w-wondering where you were… Did you make copies of the instructions for today's lesson?"

"You know, um, I was going to, but then there was, um…a supervillain! In, um, the cafeteria…stealing…snacks?"

Alphys sighed. "You forgot again, didn't you?"

Kris gritted their teeth and sighed, "Yeeeep."

"That's okay…" Alphys said resignedly, handing them a sheet of paper. "You'll just have to copy it onto the chalkboard for everyone…"

"It's a good thing you picked a T.A. who's so tall and has such good handwriting," Kris quipped, pulling Alphys's step stool up to the chalkboard with their foot.

"Hey Kris," Monster Kid called out, "why are you using the stool when you could just climb up the wall?"

"Because it's rude to get footprints on someone's chalkboard, MK," Kris replied. "Next question."

"Who were you fighting in the cafeteria?" Snowy snickered. "The Snack Gobbler?"

"Not actually a real villain. Next."

"What do you mean not real? Catti's sitting right there."

Catti very, very slowly raised her head and swiveled it around to look at Snowy. Then she made a threatening hissing noise in the back of her throat before turning back to her phone.

"M-Maybe if anyone has any chemistry-related questions they'd like to ask before we get started?" Alphys suggested.

"I've got one, for Kris," Jockington said, slithering forward on the table. "Have you and, Noelle, gotten to first base y-"

He was interrupted by Noelle entering the classroom, followed by a handful of the remaining students. She stopped when she saw everyone staring at her with smirks on their faces, Kris trying hard not to blush. "Hi, guys! Did I miss something?"

"Not at all, N-Noelle!" Alphys stammered. "We were just getting st-started…" Kris had noticed that she got even more stammery than usual around Noelle. Even their teachers weren't immune to hero worship, and Alphys was especially

susceptible; everyone knew the little yellow lizard monster was a giant nerd who loved comics and cartoons about superheroes.

Noelle took her seat, giving Kris an encouraging thumbs up as if to say, "Your chalkboard handwriting is legible and you're doing a great job." It was nice of her to lie to protect their feelings like that.

"All right, c-class," Alphys began. "For today's l-lesson we'll be learning about a chemical compound you may have heard about in the news, called Mutant Growth Hormone, or MGH for short…"

Kris helpfully underlined the words "Mutant Growth Hormone" on the chalkboard, so the class would be able to tell which of their messy scribble letters were which.

"Aw, heck yeah!" Jockington said. "Finally gonna get, roided up, for class credit."

"In theory o-only!" Alphys was quick to say. "No hands-on learning today… But you bring up an interesting point, Jockington. MGH is distributed on the streets as an illegal steroid. It's actually…kind of a big problem…because it's so addictive and has so many bad side-effects…"

Kris had busted enough drug deals to know first-hand that this was true, but they could deliver the "don't do drugs, kids" part of the lesson plan later. "First thing's first, Ms. Alphys," they nudged. "What *is* Mutant Growth Hormone?"

"R-Right!" Alphys said, perking up. "MGH is a biochemical produced within the bodies of Boss Monsters. It's part of what makes them so much bigger and stronger than the average monster."

Kris thought about fighting their father on that fateful night a couple months ago, when their life as Kris and their duty as Spider-Human had violently intersected. They tried not to think about it often, but they weren't sure they'd ever be able to forget it. Kingpin was built like a brick wall and hit like a tank - all thanks to being a Boss Monster. He'd barely flinched when they'd hit him, and only their own super-strength had let them withstand his blows.

"MGH can be extracted and synthesized into a drug," Alphys continued. "Although it's rare, more and more of it has been flooding the city lately. No one knows where it's coming from, b-but I'm sure you've seen the news stories about…aggressive, super-strong monsters going on r-rampages. Sometimes it's used by c-criminals for robberies and things, but often MGH users are just addicts who will do a-anything for their next fix…"

"It's a bad look," Kris added. "Stay in school, kids."

"Thankfully we have people like K-Kris and Noelle here working to keep us safe…" Alphys acknowledged.

Kris gave a little bow, although Noelle looked a bit embarrassed to have a spotlight put on her. Alphys looked somehow even more embarrassed though. Like the idea of her students taking on the drug trade fists-first was a bit

scandalous. Kris figured she probably thought that job should be left to the adults; a common enough opinion these days.

“A-Anyways,” Alphys said, quickly brushing past the subject, “we’re not here to t-talk about the social impacts of drug use. I’ll leave that to your Health instructors. We’re here to learn about Boss Monster physiology and how MGH and other chemicals like it can be extracted and used in a variety of medicines and pharmaceutical products… the safe and legal kind! I worked on this kind of research for Gastcorp before I became a t-teacher, you know!”

“We know, you've only mentioned it a hundred times,” Snowy said sarcastically.

“The chemical process is a-actually really interesting!” Alphys said, ignoring the interruption. She turned back to the chalkboard, giving Kris an opening to throw a small web ball at Snowy’s head. “So if you’ll all please open your textbooks to page 265…”

The rest of the class passed without incident. Since it wasn’t a class they were actually taking, just assisting with, Kris didn’t have to pay that much attention. They’d had plenty of practice drowning Alphys’ stammering lectures out over the years, anyways. Instead their attention drifted to Noelle, trying to watch her without her noticing her watching them (though she did catch them staring a couple times, and Kris couldn’t help but smile at the way it made her blush).

Noelle still looked tired. More than once during the class, Kris noticed her eyelids drooping and her head starting to fall forward, before she jerked back upright, blinking rapidly. She still took notes, but her eyes were unfocused and her posture sleepy, slumped over her desk. Alphys didn’t seem to notice; her attention was on the blackboard, but to Kris the difference between the old, bright and engaged Noelle they remembered and this current, worn-down Noelle was unmistakable. They’d felt much the same way in their first few months as a superhero. The difference was they’d *always* been quiet and sleepy in class, so it was easier to hide.

When the bell finally rang, Kris told Noelle they’d see her at lunch and stayed behind to help Alphys tidy up the classroom. Even though they hadn’t done any hands-on lab work in the day’s lesson, there was still a lot of equipment left lying around that needed sorting.

“I’ll be better prepared next time, I promise,” Kris said, feeling a bit guilty that they hadn’t been the most help today.

“Th-That’s alright, Kris,” Alphys stammered. “I hope you at least learned something…”

“About MGH?” In truth, they hadn’t absorbed that much of the lecture. What could they learn about the drug in a classroom that they hadn’t already seen first-hand on the streets? The illegal MGH trade had spiked in the years since they’d become Spider-Human. “Uh, yeah, it was interesting. And kind of sad, too. I mean, I know how addictive that kind of power can be, even if you don’t get it from a drug. It doesn’t feel great that there are people so desperate to feel that same kind of strength that they mess up their lives like that.”

Alphys paused for a moment mid-way through restocking one of the cupboards with beakers. “Can you b-blame them, though? Most p-people don’t get to take a spider-bite shortcut to having powers…”

“It wasn’t a shortcut, it was a freak accident,” Kris scoffed.

“One that was replicated, with Noelle…”

“Also by accident. I’m just saying, if people want superpowers so bad, maybe they should be going to Gaster instead of their local drug dealer. Guess they wouldn’t be able to afford those Big Pharma prices anyways. When he stole a sample of Noelle’s blood, he was probably thinking he could make a killing if he developed a legal form of something like MGH.”

Alphys blinked at them, looking shocked. “He took Noelle’s blood??”

Kris cleared their throat awkwardly. With all the things about Noelle’s adventures that were public knowledge now, they’d forgotten that little incident wasn’t one of them. Maybe they should keep their mouth a bit more tightly sealed. “It’s not important. What I’m trying to say is, there’s always going to be people trying to replicate what Noelle and I can do.”

“R-Right…” Alphys said, an odd far-off tone in her voice. After a moment’s silence she added, “I think people just want to feel st-strong. Hard to blame them with the world being so dangerous these days.”

“Yeah. It’s not like I’m saying I want all the power to myself.” *Angel knows it’s nice to not be the only one.* “Just wish people weren’t being preyed on just because they want to be like me.”

“I agree…” Alphys turned away, looking up at the blackboard where Kris had transcribed notes on chemical equations for her. “There should be a better way. A s-safer way…”

Kris sighed. “Well, I should be getting to my next class. Unless there’s anything else you need help with?”

“No, you go ahead, Kris,” Alphys said. “I have a…project to work on.”

****

Later, after a quick nap during math class (unintentional, they promised!), Kris found themself sitting in the cafeteria with Noelle, across from Berdly and Martlet. The female bluebird was integrating herself into their little friend group with remarkable speed. Kris and Noelle had experienced a lot of their classmates trying to ingratiate themselves with the young heroes since they ditched their secret identities, but Martlet felt different. Where some of the others had felt like they just wanted to be friends for the sake of social ladder-climbing clout,

Martlet didn't appear to have a single insincere bone in her body. She was bubbly, scatterbrained, awkward, clumsy, and immensely endearing.

She was also thrilled to be introduced to Noelle, even more so than she'd been to meet Kris on the bus. The competitive part of Kris might have been offended, had Martlet's fangirling not seemed to lift Noelle's spirits so much. Though she still looked tired, Noelle had perked up considerably during lunch. And hey, Kris figured it was only fair she got the lion monster's share of the adoration. She was the active superhero after all, and they were just a retired one.

"Ooo, ooh, Noelle!" Martlet was chirping excitedly. "Can I call you Noelle? Is that okay?" This was the third time she had asked that question.

"Of course you can, Martlet!" Noelle giggled. "That *is* my name after all. And you don't have to raise your hand to ask a question you know. We're not in class, fahaha."

Martlet lowered her wing. "Right! Um. I just *have* to ask…what does webslinging feel like?"

"Can't you fly?" Kris pointed out through a mouthful of macaroni and cheese. "Probably feels a lot like that, wouldn't it?"

*"Actually,"* Berdly interjected, pushing the bridge of his glasses up on his beak, "the two sensations would be quite different, since your method of transportation relies upon the physics of trajectory, momentum, and the placement of your webbing's points of attachment. Swinging through the air on a rope is nothing like proper flight, merely an inferior simulacrum of the abilities of a true avian. No offense."

"None taken," Noelle said brightly. It seemed like even Berdly couldn't ruin her mood right now. Kris should probably be taking notes on how she managed that. "I agree that flying would be a lot easier! But webslinging is kind of like the next best thing. I used to dream of being able to fly, before I got my powers, and now I sort of can!"

"I can fly!" Martlet chirped. "Just, uh, not for very long." She plopped her head down on the table, looking embarrassed. "I get tired easily…"

Kris had to repress an unkind snort. "That makes your name kind of ironic."

"I knew that when I chose it!" Martlet protested. "It's supposed to be inspirational. Martlet, the mythical bird without feet, that spends its entire life on the wing, never roosting."

"How is it inspiring to never be able to sit still?" Kris wondered out loud. Noelle gave them a look like 'Kris, you're being rude again,' but they genuinely wanted to know.

Martlet shrugged her wings. "Us Martlets can't rest, which means we can't afford to ever tire. We never settle, so we're always changing. There's, um, a freedom in that? If you don't have any one place you belong, then you can adapt to survive

anywhere! But living that way takes constant effort. You're always in flight, and flight isn't self-sustaining. You have to work to stay aloft, you know?"

"Is that how you envision yourself, fair Martlet?" Berdly asked. "As a creature of constant evolution?"

"Well," Martlet said, her feathers fluffing up self-consciously, "that's how I felt at the start of my transition, at least. I…wanted to distance myself from my old life. For a lot of reasons." She leaned back in her chair, looking around the school cafeteria with its hustle and bustle of noisy students filling the tables, and her beak curved into a smile. "But I'm starting to think that belonging somewhere wouldn't be so bad."

Berdly raised his Monster-Cola can as if to toast her words. "I for one am happy that such a fair lady as yourself decided to roost here for a time!"

"Bahaha!" Martlet cackled, shoving him playfully. "Thanks, Berdly! But you don't have to 'fair lady' me so much. I mean, gosh, it's validating and stuff, but don't overdo it, dude!"

"Ah…I will endeavor to abide by your preferences, my good maiden!"

"How is that any diff-" Kris started to say, but Noelle elbowed them.

"Don't interfere!" she whispered.

"With what?" they mouthed back at her. Berdly was both an incorrigible flirt and a terrible one. Despite that, though, Martlet was laughing and going along with it, and the pair of them seemed already well on their way to becoming fast friends, so perhaps Noelle was right and they should let nature take its course.

They let Berdly babble on for a while, but when the topic turned to Berdly bragging about his job at Gastcorp, making it sound like he was involved in top-secret research projects instead of just a low-level entry position, Kris couldn't stand his feather-preening any longer. "I still don't understand how both you and Noelle went through that internship program together and somehow *you're* the one who ended up working at Gastcorp."

"Krisberly!" Berdly gasped, butchering their name in accordance with a running gag that he and he alone found funny. "Are you implying I was merely some kind of DEI hire? That Gastcorp needed to meet a quota for bird monsters?" He shook his head, scandalized. "Why, Kristopher, I'm surprised at you. Such allegations…they could almost be called racist. For shame."

Kris, who had implied no such thing, scowled at him.

"Kris," Noelle placated, "Berdly graduated that internship program just like the rest of us."

"That's not the point. Gaster has to know who he is, right? After everything that happened between you and him, doesn't it seem a little suspicious that he'd hire one of your friends?"

“Well, that’s true…” Noelle admitted. “But it also gives us a man on the inside. Like a mole…but a bird…an inside mole birdman…”

“Oooo!” Martlet said, her eyes lighting up with excitement. “Berdly! You’re a spy??”

“Shhh!” Berdly hissed. “Not so loud! But yes,” he continued in a whisper, leaning in towards Martlet conspiratorially, “it’s true. You may not realize it from looking at me, but I am excellent at the art of infiltration.”

“Is that what they’re calling it these days?” Kris sniggered. Noelle gave them a hard elbow in the ribs. Even though she wasn’t the target of the joke, her nose was starting to glow with embarrassment.

But the funny moment didn’t last long before a faint tingle spread across their scalp. Kris sat up straight, scanning the room just as a large purple shape lumbered into view, making a beeline towards them across the cafeteria. Kris nudged Noelle and gestured with their chin. “Don’t look now, but here comes trouble.”

Susie reached their table and didn’t even hesitate before snatching up Berdly’s tray and shoveling what remained of his uneaten food into her mouth, plastic fork and all. Kris was reminded vividly of a garbage bin being lifted by the arm of the truck and emptied into the back.

Susie loomed over Berdly and Martlet, staring down Kris and Noelle as though daring them to do something about it. The surrounding tables had gone very quiet suddenly, so the only sound that could be heard was a loud crunching noise as she chewed. That must have been the fork.

Berdly looked annoyed but resigned to it. Martlet was staring up at Susie with her beak hanging open, aghast. It was Noelle who broke the silence. “You know you can get your own food, right?”

“Did that already,” Susie grunted. “Still hungry.”

Kris took a moment to observe her more closely. Susie was dressed in a ratty old t-shirt and ripped jeans, as she usually was. But she walked with a bit of a limp to her lumbering gait today, and there was dark bruising under the scales of her left eye. She also had a wheezy quality to her breathing: It was subtle, like she was keeping a tight lid on it, but this close to her they could hear the pained hitch in her breath when she inhaled.

“Bet you were wondering what happened to me after the cops came to the church last night,” Susie said accusingly, glaring down at Noelle. “Oh wait, that’s right. You don’t care.”

“Susie,” Noelle began, “That’s not -”

“You got me in a lot of trouble, Holiday,” Susie said, baring her teeth. “So consider this a warning. I find you in trouble again, I’m not saving your ass. Next time I see you outside of school, I’m gonna pay you back. Every…last…cent. You get me?”

“Um, am I missing something here?” Berdly interjected. “Does Susie owe you money, Noelle?”

“Shut up, birdbrain,” Susie snarled. “Don’t wanna hear your annoying voice today. Only reason I haven’t bitten your throat out ages ago is ‘cause I hate the feeling of feathers stuck between my teeth.”

“Th-that’s enough!” Martlet cried, shoving her chair back and standing up to confront Susie. It wasn’t terribly intimidating, since even with her feathers fluffed up she was half the lizard monster’s height, and her voice shook. “I should have known this school would have bullies! Every place does, I guess. But my new friends have been so nice to me, and two-thirds of them are literally superheroes, and I won’t let you pick on them!”

Susie glared down at her, unimpressed. “Who the hell are you, pipsqueak?”

“I’m M-Martlet! I’m new! And I’m not afraid of you!”

Susie grinned, wide and sharp. “That’s adorable. You gonna hide behind your groupies, Holiday? You’re even more of a coward than I thought.”

“It’s okay, Martlet,” Noelle tried to tell her. “We can handle this ourselves. It’s only Susie, we’re all used to putting up with her.”

“Hey!” Susie huffed.

“That, um, came out meaner than I meant it to,” Noelle said, blushing.

*Oh, for Angel’s sake.* Time to step in here. “Susie,” Kris said, pointing their arm at Susie, fingers hovering over their palm, “get out of Martlet’s face or I’ll web you up and hang you from the ceiling again.”

“She got in my face first!” Susie fumed. “You stupid Spider-dorks think you can solve everything with a web and a threat, don’t you? Well you can’t! That’s not how the world works! If you lived in the real world with the rest of us, instead of your stupid power fantasy, you’d understand that!”

“So go cry about it to someone who cares,” Kris snapped. They didn’t know what Susie’s problem was, but they were sick of her making it all about herself when everyone else had problems of their own. Whatever was going on in Susie’s life, at least she didn’t have a supervillain father who had tried to kill her. Maybe if she could trade places with them, she’d realize their life was no picnic either.

“Kris!” Noelle chided, horrified by their rudeness. But Noelle didn’t get it. She was too nice for her own good, and ‘nice’ wasn’t going to fix a bully.

Susie looked incensed, practically pouring steam out her nostrils, but Martlet was still standing in her way and half the school was watching now. Kris could see the gears turning as she realized she’d picked a poor time and place to start a fight.

Finally she rolled her shoulders and turned her head away and said, “Be seeing you, spider-freaks. Better hope you see me first.”

“Don’t worry, we have a spider-sense for that!” Kris called after her helpfully. “Literally impossible not to see you coming.”

Susie paused and turned back, and for a moment, Kris thought they’d successfully goaded her into doing something stupid. But instead, she addressed Martlet. “Hey, new girl. You seem too nice for these freaks. Word of advice? Never meet your heroes. They’ll only let you down.”

Susie stalked off, and gradually the silence broke as all the other students began to whisper excitedly and talk amongst themselves. From the snippets of conversation Kris overheard, it sounded like some of them had been placing bets on whether or not there would be a fight.

Martlet looked at them with wide eyes, her feathers still fluffed up defensively. “What the heck was that about??”

“Who even knows with her?” Kris shrugged.

“Ugh, I’m sorry, Martlet,” Noelle groaned, deflating onto the table like a punctured balloon. Her earlier good spirits were nowhere to be seen, exhaustion having supplanted them again. Kris rubbed her back reassuringly. “Susie’s just… like that. Mad at the world. I wish I knew how to help her.”

“I keep telling you,” Kris said gently, “not everything has to be your responsibility.” They looked at their new friend and smiled. “Maybe Martlet can win her over with the power of friendship and positivity.”

“Yes, good job Martlet!” Berdly crowed. “A stunning display of courage! Positively heroic! I was, of course, about to intervene, but I doubt I could have done better myself.”

“Oh, gosh, well. I just don’t like bullies, that’s all. It’s not like you really needed my help, I mean you guys are literally heroes, and I’m just…me.”

“Hey, you don’t need powers to hang with us,” Kris said. “I keep trying to tell people it’s not all it's cracked up to be.”

Martlet beamed, like a little blue ray of sunshine. “Well I’m just happy to be included! Gosh you all are so nice! I still can’t believe I’m friends with Spider-Doe and Spider-Human, eee!”

And just like that she was back to excited squealing. Kris leaned over to whisper to Noelle, “This is gonna get old fast, isn’t it?”

“Fahaha,” Noelle giggled. “You’re too cynical, Kris. A girl could have worse heroes than you.”

“Or you,” Kris said, and snuck in a quick kiss. This only made Martlet fangirl harder, squeeing so hard that she looked a bit blue in the face - although with her, it was hard to tell if that was normal or not.

The girl was adorable. Such innocence must be protected at all costs. Kris was going to have to take her under their wing, make sure everyone knew not to mess

with her. And maybe try and dissuade her from using her body as a shield every time Susie or somebody threatened them and Noelle. It was a weird feeling to have somebody else try and protect them instead of the other way around.

“Welcome to the Spider-Squad, Martlet,” Kris told her. “Hope you survive the experience.”

# Chapter 4: Stealth Mission!

Berdly Cristata walked through the maze-like corridors of Gastcorp's top-security wing with confidence, his back straight and his head held high. His white lab coat was immaculate, and he even had a pencil tucked between the feathers where his ear would have been if he'd had one. He looked like someone who belonged there, and definitely not someone who had just used a homemade invisibility suit to sneak past a security checkpoint.

The suit - more like a rubbery membrane - was a slimmer, more form-fitting version of the one he'd designed for his Gastcorp bioengineering internship, lo those many months ago. That groundbreaking innovation hadn't won him a more permanent position upon the internship's completion, probably on account of how the prototype hadn't worked during his demonstration, an unfortunate but purely temporary setback. So he had been surprised when Doctor Norman Gaster himself had reached out a few weeks later to offer him a job as an assistant researcher.

Noelle had been equally baffled when he'd shared the news, considering she was the one who had originally been offered such a position, before she and Gaster had, to use pedestrian colloquialisms, a messy falling out. Noelle's paranoid crimefighter's mind, always looking for the faint tingle of danger, immediately jumped to the conclusion that Gaster only wanted her best friend close at hand as potential leverage to use against her.

Berdly had already accepted the job on the spot, of course. Doctor Gaster might have kidnapped Noelle and attempted to extract the secrets of her superpowers by taking blood samples from her without her consent, but that didn't change the fact that Gastcorp was *the* number one destination for anyone hoping for a career in the sciences. The amount of good he could do for the world with a megacorporation's resources at his fingertips dwarfed the impact he'd already had as the trusty assistant of not one but two superheroes. He couldn't put that job on a resume, but now he had a chance to make a name for himself! Sometimes, in a world run by corrupt institutions, one had to affect change upon the system from within!

Also, like he had humbly explained to Martlet the other day, it gave him the opportunity to spy on Gaster for Noelle.

It was for that exact reason that he was currently power walking down a sterile white corridor with a rubbery light-bending sheet clinging to his feathers, breaking his confident stride only to occasionally press himself flat against a wall when someone else walked by.

No one could see him - save for a faint shimmer in the air if you looked closely enough, and these scientist types always walked with their heads down, noses buried in notes - but it was still important to walk like you knew where you were going. If you didn't practice discipline while invisible, it would be all too easy to make lapses when it really mattered! Stealth in real life didn't work like it did in

fanciful virtual simulations such as *Steel Gear Liquid* - there would be no hiding under cardboard boxes for him! The only obfuscation he needed, aside from being literally invisible, was the simple illusion of acting like someone who belonged in his current environment.

Fortunately, Berdly had already had plenty of practice pretending to fit in. He'd have been lying to himself if he said it wasn't a relief to finally enter the adult world, where he could study and learn from his intellectual equals. His entire high school career had been spent trying to remain modest enough about his superior academic performance that he wouldn't draw the resentful ire of his more feeble-minded classmates. It was a delicate juggling act between being exceptional enough to succeed and normal enough to be socially unthreatening. Of all his classmates, only Kris and Noelle really understood what that was like, and ever since becoming Spider-Doe, Noelle hadn't had as much time to spend studying with him. All the excitement last fall had been enough of a distraction that even *his* grades had begun to slip, if you could believe that!

Noelle *had* taken the time to give him some modest assistance in upgrading his stealth suit, though. That had been nice of her. She totally hadn't needed to do that, of course - he would have gotten it eventually! But it was sweet that she wanted to help.

He would return the favor by giving her some good intel on whatever Gaster was up to. His whisper network of inadvertent informants had been abuzz all day. *Something big's going down in R&D today,* they had said. *Whatever Doctor Gaster's been working on so feverishly for months, it's getting close to completion.* The low-level workers he'd been sequestered with hadn't known much, but the rumors had been enough to point him in the right direction. As had the vague emails going out reminding everyone about heightened security around the R&D labs, warning all employees to make sure they didn't leave their ID keycards unattended.

Borrowing a keycard from one of his superiors while invisible had been the easy part. The harder part was figuring out where to go once he got past the locked doors.

Berdly crept (confidently!) down the hall as quietly as he could on clawed bird's feet, peeking inside laboratories and storage rooms as he went but finding nothing out of the ordinary. He was following the signs pointing the way to this area's main hall, but the side passageways seemed to go on forever. It was almost like the building's floor plan had been designed to be disorienting to anyone without a high enough IQ to comprehend it…a cunning additional layer of security! Too bad for them that Berdly was no ordinary corporate espionager. He was practically a superhero himself by this point.

The sound of footsteps and a voice coming around the corner ahead of him derailed his brilliant internal monologue. He definitely didn't panic for a moment when he saw a bull monster wearing a tight black suit and sunglasses appear, walking quickly towards him. Obviously, he remembered he was invisible and simply stepped aside and let the man pass right by him.

The bull had the look of a security guard, and he was talking into a bluetooth headset in his ear. “Yes sir, Doctor Gaster, I’m on my way. No sir, I didn’t mean to keep you waiting. Just had to investigate a potential situation. One of the cameras picked up a door to this wing unlocking and sliding open and shut by itself. Probably an electrical malfunction. We sent a technician to take a look.” He paused. “An extra guard on every door in and out of the lab? No, of course that won’t be a problem. I just thought you wanted most of my men in there with you, in case… Yes. Yes, of course. You’re the boss.”

He strode off down the hall, in the direction Berdly had just come from. Berdly stared at the burly guard’s retreating back, his beak hanging open in disbelief. Surely, *surely,* he could not have been wandering in the wrong direction this whole time! Unless… unless they had deliberately made the signage misleading to confuse intruders! Yes, that had to be it. This corporate security was more beguiling than he’d given them credit for. But they’d have to try harder than that to get the best of him!

Berdly hurried to follow the guard. The best method for finding your way when you didn’t know where you were going was to find someone who looked like they did and follow them. He was pretty sure he had read that in a book somewhere.

The bull walked almost as quickly and confidently as Berdly, and his heavy hooved footsteps helpfully masked the pitter-patter of Berdly’s claws on the smooth floor. Before long, however, the bluebird encountered an obstacle. When the guard reached a large sliding door - the signage marking it (correctly this time, it would seem!) as leading to the R&D lab - rather than going inside and letting Berdly slip in after him, he turned his back to the entrance and put a finger to his earpiece, reporting in with a simple, “In position.”

Well, that wouldn’t do! His ‘in position’ position was a direct impediment to Berdly’s goals! How to get him to move?

Several ideas flashed through Berdly’s mind in quick succession, like the supercomputer of his brain was rapidly switching browser tabs. They ranged from pulling a fire alarm somewhere to pretending to be a ghost and scaring the guard away. He dismissed them one by one as impractical. Pulling the fire alarm would probably only cause a security lockdown, and it was difficult to be a very frightening ghost when he was both invisible and totally corporeal to anyone who wanted to reach out and grab him.

*There must be another way! What would Spider-Human and/or Spider-Doe do?*

They would probably climb up a wall or something. They’d be sneaking along on the ceiling, pretending the laws of gravity didn’t apply to them, instead of hoofing it on the ground like the common man. Berdly raised his eyes, tracking the movements of an imaginary spider-hero, and there, lo and behold, he noticed a boxy external ventilation shaft running along the ceiling like a rectangular tube. It looked like it protruded through the wall above the door and into the adjacent room, and was perhaps even large enough for a modestly-sized adolescent bluebird to squeeze through. What luck! Now he just needed to find a point of entry.

He hurried back down the hall and around the corner, following the ventilation shaft. He'd played enough video games to know that these things always had hatches or vents along the bottom for people to crawl inside of. In this way, at least, life really did imitate art.

There! He had spotted just such an opportunity, a grate that looked like he might be able to get it open. Though it was…a little high up. Just a tad out of reach. A spider-hero would have easily been able to pull themself up on a strand of webbing, but Berdly would have to utilize more pedestrian methods of gaining altitude.

Thankfully, this was why the Angel had given him wings.

Berdly jumped up as high as he could go and flapped his arms. It took quite a bit of frantic flapping with the extra weight from the stealth suit, but he was able to hover off the ground and, after a few seconds, lift himself slightly higher. Controlled ascent from a stationary position was difficult to achieve; he was much better at gliding.

Nonetheless, he managed to get high enough to reach up and grab the thin bars covering the vent. He gave it a tug, hanging there with his full body weight pulling on the vent cover. It didn't budge. He pulled again, kicking his legs in the air. Still nothing.

Curses! He wasn't heavy enough. An ironic catch-22 of having hollow bones. Thankfully, Berdly always came prepared for any situation. He dug a hand under the lip of the stealth suit and reached inside his lab coat to unzip the small satchel he wore around his waist. Where would a hero be without his trusty utility belt?

He pulled out a screwdriver and, still dangling in the air, set to work unscrewing the bolt holding the vent shut. Luck was on his side - the screwdriver was a perfect match! He carried several varieties, of course, but trying them all one by one while holding himself up by one arm would have been a real pain.

After a little loosening, the bolt fell free, pinging off the floor, and the vent swung open. It happened so suddenly that Berdly lost his grip and fell to the floor with a squawk.

Around the corner, he heard the guard's voice grunt, "What was that?"

Berdly froze, but he didn't hear those heavy footsteps approaching. The guard must have been hesitating, perhaps torn between desire to investigate the sound and reluctance to leave his post. Berdly knew what he had to do: In every stealth mission, there was a time for slow, cautious movement and a time for haste.

He jumped up and grabbed the dangling vent cover, using it to haul himself up through the entrance he'd made. It took several seconds, as the maneuver was slightly less graceful than the Spiders made it look, and he had to stuff himself through the small opening while taking care not to rip his fragile stealth suit.

Only once inside did he realize he'd left the bolt on the floor, with no way to reattach it or close the very conspicuously open grate. Oh well, he would have to

hope that if spotted, it would be blamed on a loose bolt finally giving out. After all, who would be crazy enough to break into a ventilation shaft?

With that thought floating through his head, Berdly began to army-crawl on his belly down the metal corridor, going as slowly as he could to avoid making too much noise. A true ninja knew that before one could master stealth, one must first master its ancient enemy: sound. The only problem was these things were remarkably hard to be quiet in; every time he moved too quickly or bumped his elbow on the side, he worried that his banging about would be audible from outside the tube. Thankfully, he passed right over where he judged the guard to have been standing without any sign that the bull was on to him.

Past that point, the shaft hit a sharp right angle and proceeded straight upwards. Berdly wasn't about to let that stop him, though. He had come too far to quit now! He couldn't scale the shaft's walls directly like his friends, but by spreading his arms and legs to brace himself against the sides, he could slowly shimmy his way upwards, using his own leverage to keep from sliding back down.

Something was definitely happening in the lab below him. Now that he was inside the room, he could hear a strong hum, like the buzz of massive machinery coming to life. With it came a vibration that he could feel even from in here, like the building itself was shaking slightly.

There were raised voices too, shouting over the increasingly loud hum. One voice in particular that Berdly recognized, a crisp and dry but authoritative, commanding shout: "It's working! Hold those levels steady, don't let it overload! We can't afford another failure!"

Doctor Gaster's voice, although something sounded a bit off about it; the location of the voice felt hard to judge from in there. Whatever was going on down below, it must be important indeed if Gaster was personally supervising the experiment. Berdly tried to climb faster. He needed to get a look outside this cramped shaft.

A flash of light illuminated the dark crawlspace just above him, shining up through the gaps in another vent. That was his chance! All this physical exertion was getting tiring, and Berdly knew he couldn't disappear for too long or someone would start looking for him. But he couldn't leave until he'd gotten a glance at the room below. Noelle was counting on him!

He took a deep breath and kept climbing. It was slow going, but finally he made it to the vent, braced his back against the opposite wall, and peered outside.

To his surprise, the room below him was familiar. It was the enormous central engineering laboratory at the heart of the Gastcorp building. Berdly hadn't been there in person before, but he had seen it in a televised broadcast, the night of the ill-fated M.E.C.C.A. reactor test. The experimental reactor, intended to power the city by drawing on energy from other dimensions, had instead exploded. When Berdly had seen this room on television, it had been on fire.

But that was months ago. The machine in the center of the laboratory today was not on fire. It was not a half-exploded wreck. It was a massive, circular ring of sleek metal and glowing lights, like something out of the classic science fiction

show *Spacegate.* And it had obviously been turned on. Lights on the circumference of the ring were flashing around and around in a looping pattern, faster and faster, and the buzzing sound was reaching a fever pitch. It almost felt to Berdly like there was a charge of static electricity in the air, making his feathers tingle.

He could hear Gaster's voice again, barking orders, and he realized why it sounded different. The scientist was speaking over an intercom, not from the laboratory floor below. Looking down again, Berdly noticed that he couldn't see anyone standing near the reactor. They must be conducting this test remotely from outside the room. That made sense, since the last time they had done this, the explosion had come very close to injuring Gaster, not to mention Kris and Noelle. It was a sensible safety precaution.

It also meant that Berdly was the only one in the room with a potentially unstable reactor that had a history of blowing up. He should probably get out of there, right now.

He was about to start making his way back down in a hurry when something changed. The reactor's hum abruptly ceased; the lights stopped flashing. Berdly held his breath, waiting for the sudden explosion that was sure to come at any moment.

Instead, a pool of inky black fluid appeared in the center of the ring, before expanding to fill the entire circle. It hung there, suspended in the air like someone had turned an oil spill on its side.

"It worked!" Gaster's voice crackled over the intercom, a rattling bellow of triumph. "My god, a fully stable portal. Do you realize what this means?! I'm going down there. I need to see this for myself."

Berdly couldn't blame him. Even viewed from a distance like this, there was something about that strange field of shifting darkness that was…inviting. Almost hypnotic. It made him wonder what it would feel like to touch it…

Berdly blinked, collecting his thoughts. It seemed like there was no immediate danger of another reactor meltdown, which meant he didn't have to leave right away. He could stay and see what that pool of darkness did. Gather more intel for Noelle.

Noelle. He needed to call her. She needed to know what was happening here. In case…in case something went wrong.

With trembling fingers, still braced between his feet and his back, he retrieved his phone, tapping over to Noelle's name in his contacts. It was after school, which meant that Noelle would either be home studying, or out patrolling the city as Spider-Doe. He'd try her phone first, and if she didn't answer, he'd try the earpiece that he used to communicate with Kris and Noelle when they were in costume.

She picked up on the fourth ring. "Hi, Berdly! What's up?" Her voice came through distorted, cutting in and out. Blast, of course he wouldn't have very good

reception in here.

“Noelle!” he squawked. “I'm at Gastcorp. Listen, you know that multiverse reactor that blew up in your face last year and gave you superpowers, well I guess it didn't give you superpowers that was the spider but it happened at the same time so it's kind of the same thing anyways that reactor?” He cut himself off, frowning. He was jabbering, which was unlike him. Normally he expressed himself more clearly and eloquently.

“Berdly, slow down,” Noelle's voice came through in jerky bits and pieces. “I can barely hear you! Something ab - corp? Are you c- from work? Do you need help with some DNA sequencing again?”

“No!” he chirped. “I was doing a stealth mission! And I found out they've rebuilt the M.E.C.C.A. reactor! They are testing it right now and it didn't explode this time but it appears to be generating some kind of…shadow goop.”

“Shadow *what?”*

“Black stuff! A portal thing! Look, I’m sure if I could study it more closely I could describe it in the proper scientific terms, but I am wedged into a ventilation shaft way up on the wall and the air feels electric and *it's a little hard to think right now!”*

“Berdly, are y- danger? Do you ne- der-Doe?”

“Wait, wait!” Berdly shushed her. “I can see Doctor Gaster! He's approaching the whatever it is!”

The figure below was wearing a biohazard suit that covered him head to toe, not unlike Berdly’s attire - with the difference being that instead of making him invisible, it made him seem bulkier than he was in reality. Berdly couldn't see the skeleton’s pale face through the visor, but that had to be Gaster. Who else would dare walk right up to that strange rippling surface of pure blackness?

“Berdly?” Noelle's voice sounded worried on the other end of the phone. “Berdly, tal- me. What's happening?”

For some reason Berdly found himself holding his breath as he watched Doctor Gaster extend an arm towards the surface of the dark liquid wall. He should have spoken up to make sure Noelle heard him, but instead he spoke in an awed whisper. “He's…he’s going to touch it.”

Gaster’s hand made contact with the tranquil, softly rippling surface.

The darkness began to tremble all over, little drops leaping up from the surface like a glass of water shaking in the vibrations of an incoming earthquake.

Then it *burst* outward like a massive geyser, completely engulfing Gaster.

Berdly screamed. “IT ATE HIM! OH MY GOD IT ATE GASTER!”

But it was worse than that. The darkness didn't stop, didn't pull itself back in. It spilled forth like a leak in a ruptured dam, and suddenly it didn't seem so much like a liquid at all. It didn't fill the room like water, splashing around and slowly rising. It moved like something halfway between water and smoke, dense and heavy but strangely gaseous, like a cloud of smog.

An alarm blared an ear-splitting warning. Red emergency lights on the walls flashed, but they were immediately getting swallowed up by that unnatural darkness. It was like it absorbed all the light in the room. Berdly's already dark ventilation shaft was growing rapidly darker.

“Noelle!” he screamed into the phone. “Noelle it's spreading! It's getting everywhere, it's shooting out of the reactor like a fountain! A fountain of pure darkness! Noelle don't let it get me, I DON'T WANT TO BE A SPY ANYMORE PLEASE NOELLE SAVE M-”

Berdly dropped the phone as he fell into endless, empty darkness.

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Noelle lowered her phone, staring down at it in her palm with a sick feeling of worry in the pit of her stomach. The call had been dropped so abruptly, and although she hadn’t been able to make out all the words, Berdly had sounded scared.

“What was that about?” Kris asked, sitting up from where they had been lounging on her bed. Their hair was even messier than usual, their sweater still slightly askew. Discarded textbooks and notepads were scattered off to the side of the bed; they had gotten a little distracted from their study date. Mostly that was Kris’s fault.

“Berdly’s in trouble,” Noelle said, hopping off the bed and striding quickly to her walk-in closet. It had only been a few hours ago that Kris had convinced her to hang up her costume for a while, and already she had to take it down again. She should have just left it on. “I’m sorry, but I have to go.”

“Noooo,” Kris whined, giving her puppy dog eyes from the bed. “If you go, who will keep me warm on this cold winter night? I require fluffy reindeer body heat!”

“I’m sure you’ll live,” Noelle said, shutting the closet door behind her for privacy before pulling her sweater vest over her shoulders. Maybe it was silly to be so modest around her partner, but she and Kris were taking it slow. Making out with their clothes on was about as far as their intimacy had extended, and while she wasn’t exactly *opposed* to them seeing her undressed eventually, the first time for that sure as heck wasn’t going to be during a quick costume change.

“Seriously Noelle,” Kris’s voice called through the door, “your room is like a freezer. I know you’re a cold-resistant species and all that, but would it kill you

to turn the heat on sometimes?"

"My mom doesn't like the energy bill to get too high. If you think it's bad in here now, you should have felt it when the window was broken." Noelle stepped into her costume's leggings and pulled them up around her waist. It was a good thing cold didn't bother her that much, too, or else swinging around outside in the winter wearing only a thin layer of fabric would be unbearable. Maybe she should sew in a layer of insulation, like Kris's costume had.

"Your mom is rich, that's insane," Kris complained. "She can afford to run the heat."

"She got rich by being frugal, I guess," Noelle said absentmindedly. She was focused on checking her web fluid cartridges, making sure she wouldn't have to worry about running out. Urgency thrummed inside her, but she had learned it wasn't wise to dash off without doing any preparation first.

"I thought she got rich from the old money inheritance from your grandparents," Kris said.

"That too." Fully dressed save for the mask in her hand, Noelle opened the closet door and approached Kris. "Aren't you going to ask what's going on with Berdly?"

"Ah, right." To their credit, Kris did look a little embarrassed. "Berdly. My friend who I care about. What's he done this time?"

"I'm…not entirely sure, actually. I couldn't hear everything he said, but it sounded like Gaster was messing with something that blew up in his face again. Maybe literally?"

"Oh, fun. I swear that place can't go a month without an explosion. Guess that's science for you."

"You could come, you know," Noelle offered. "I might need back-up." She knew what Kris was going to say, but maybe, if she kept gently nudging them…

Kris glanced down. "Nah, you've got this. You've dealt with Gastcorp shenanigans on your own just fine before. And you've come a long way since I was the one having to pull your tail out of the fire. I'd probably just slow you down now. Besides, I left my costume at home."

Had she come a long way? She supposed so, but it had only been a few months. She still felt like so much of this life was new to her, and it would have been nice to have someone by her side through it all, like she'd had at the start.

Noelle sighed. She wanted to respect her partner's boundaries, but she didn't understand why they'd become so reluctant to embrace a part of themself that used to bring them such joy. Someday soon, she would need to have a talk with Kris about their early retirement. But now was not the time. Right now she had a job to do.

“Okay, Kris,” she said. “I’ll go get Berdly out of trouble and come right back, I promise. Sorry for leaving you. You can turn the heat on if you want.”

“It’s okay, I understand. A spider’s work is never done. Good luck out there!”

Noelle pulled her mask on and hurried out the window, in part because she didn’t want to waste any time, and in part because she was afraid she wouldn’t be able to keep the hurt out of her expression. *A spider’s work is never done.* More like *her* work. Kris seemed very ready to be done with theirs.

*Well,* she thought as she webbed her way towards the city, *I’ll just have to save enough people for the both of us, then.*

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When Noelle arrived at Gastcorp it was immediately clear that something had gone terribly wrong. Exactly what, and why, was a different question entirely. Gastcorp’s headquarters was never this dark at night. Her first thought was a power outage, but it only seemed to be affecting the one building.

Noelle landed on the side of the building to take a closer look. She crawled to the nearest window - the upper offices had plenty of big panes of glass - but when she peered inside, she couldn’t see anything, not even the outline of furniture or the soft glow of a computer monitor. It was perfectly dark inside.

And then the darkness *moved.* It began to shift and swirl like smoke for a second, and then suddenly a figure staggered out of the shadows and almost ran straight into the window.

“Gah!” Noelle instinctively jumped back and nearly lost her grip on the surface. But she held on, staring wide-eyed at the man now pressed up against the other side of the glass. He was an elemental monster with skin like ice and jagged crystals for hair, and judging from the lab coat, he must have been one of the scientists.

“Oh Angel, I found it!” the man said. “I can see outside! I found a way out!” She could barely hear him, his voice muffled through the glass. “Please, you have to help me! Please get me out!”

“Are you hurt?” Noelle called, raising her voice to be heard. “What’s going on in there?”

“It’s all darkness. Endless black void,” the man babbled. He had a frantic look in his eyes, pounding his fist against the glass. “We’re not alone in here! There are…things. They’ve been taking people!”

“Just stay calm,” Noelle told him, though she was speaking to herself just as much. Whatever this was, she would handle it. She had to. “I’m going to get you

out. Have you seen my friend in there by any chance? A bluebird, about my age, nervous talker with a nasally voice?"

"I…I don't know. It's so dark. Please hurry! I don't know how much longer we can -"

His voice cut off as the shadows moved like a living thing, wrapping themselves around the scientist and pulling him back into the darkness. It happened so fast that he didn't even have time to scream.

"No!" Noelle shouted. She pulled her fist back, intending to break through the window and go after him, but rational thought intruded at the last second, staying her hand. Whatever force had taken over Gastcorp, it seemed to be contained inside the building for now. Maybe punching a hole in its cage was a bad idea. She needed a way in, but preferably without letting that strange darkness leak out into the city.

Rattled and disturbed, she caught her breath and headed down towards ground level. The police had formed a perimeter, keeping people away from the building, blue and red lights from their cars illuminating the scene. Noelle could see Chief Undyne herself taking point, coordinating the response and barking orders through a megaphone for a growing crowd of onlookers to stay back. If Kris had been here, they might have bypassed the police entirely and barged right in. But since Noelle's mom wanted her to coordinate with NHCPD in a more official capacity, she swung down to see what she could find out from the fiery fish monster first.

"Chief Undyne!" she called as she dropped from her webline and landed in a 3-point crouch on the roof of Undyne's police cruiser. The car alarm immediately started blaring.

"Ah! Geez kid!" Undyne yelled over the noise, jumping in surprise and fumbling in her pocket for her keys. "Not on the car, how many times do I have to tell you?"

"Sorry, sorry!" Noelle apologized, hopping down and taking her mask off while Undyne thumbed the button on her keys to get the alarm to stop. "I always forget! So, um." She gestured at Gastcorp's front entrance, where pools of shadow were pushing up against the glass doors like liquid smoke. "What's the situation?"

"Hell if I know, Holiday," Undyne said bluntly. "Witnesses said it was like the building just…went dark. But not the normal kind of dark you get when you flick a light switch off. This is something unnatural."

"I saw one of the Gastcorp workers through the window upstairs," Noelle told her, "but it was like the shadows pulled him away before I could get him out."

Undyne nodded. "We figured there had to be people trapped inside, but the officers I sent in to investigate haven't come out yet. Nothing but radio silence on their walkies."

“Wait. You already went in there?”

“Right in the front door,” Undyne said, pointing. There was a row of officers standing by a healthy distance from the entrance, watching warily as if they expected someone or something to come running out at any moment. Like it was a hostage situation, only the building itself was taking the hostages. “Which was weird, come to think of it, because I thought this building was designed to completely seal itself shut in case of emergency, like if there’s a biohazard leak or something. But either no one initiated the lockdown in time, or -”

“Or it wants people to come inside,” Noelle finished. She stared at the darkness oozing behind the doors and windows, and a shiver ran up her spine.

“Okay, bit creepier than what I was going to say. I don’t know if we should be talking about this unknown phenomenon like it’s sentient, Noelle.”

“Maybe you’re right,” Noelle said. “But the guy I spoke to through the window said there was *something* alive in there with him.”

“Great,” Undyne muttered. “Shadow creatures. I swear to the Angel, if I find out this is all Gaster’s fault somehow, I’m going to have him in handcuffs, world’s richest monster or not.”

“I wouldn’t mind seeing that,” Noelle admitted. “Is meddling with forces you don’t understand actually illegal though?”

“No, but public endangerment is! Whatever’s filling up that building seems content so far to stay inside, but if that changes and civilians get hurt…” She straightened her back, resting a hand on her holstered sidearm. “Well, my job is to make sure that doesn’t happen.”

Noelle took a deep breath and turned to face the front doors. “Then I guess my job is to go in there and see if I can stop this at its source.”

“It’s literally not,” Undyne said. “You don’t need to always put yourself in danger, Noelle, we have trained professionals for that.”

Noelle waved an arm at the building. “No one is trained for *this*. Besides, I thought you lost contact with your professionals. Which means they might be hurt. And it’s not just them. My friend Berdly’s in there.”

Undyne heaved a sigh. “Fine, I guess I couldn’t stop you even if I tried. BUT I DON’T LIKE IT. Don’t tell her I said this, but I think your mom’s crazy for letting you do this hero stuff.”

A thin smile crossed Noelle’s mouth. “It’s like you just said, Chief. She couldn’t stop me if she tried.”

“This is why I don’t have kids,” Undyne muttered, shaking her head. “Just be careful in there, okay? If anything happens to you, Carol will have my head on a pike.”

“I’ll do my best!” Noelle called over her shoulder, already pulling her mask back on and trotting towards the front doors. The officers saw her coming, and at a signal from Undyne, they made space to let her pass.

Noelle walked up to the big glass doors that led to the building’s huge entrance hall, where visitors checked in at the reception desk. It was a bit like the entrance to a hospital, in that it actually had two pairs of doors for security - the normal kind that you could push or pull open and which could be locked at night, followed by a small entry foyer and then sliding glass doors leading into the building proper. It was beyond that second entrance that the darkness had gathered up against the glass.

Noelle slipped inside the first pair of doors; despite what Undyne had said, she was almost expecting them to be locked, but they opened for her easily. She paused before getting too close to the interior doors and stared through them at the black void beyond. No sign of movement in there, aside from the shadows shifting around like smoke. Not much sign of anything that she could see.

While she gathered her courage, Noelle took a moment to pull out her phone and text Kris.

**Noelle:** About to go walk into a building full of weird otherworldly darkness, wish me luck! =XD
**Noelle:** If I don’t come back please tell my mom that I really do love her despite everything.

**Kris:** UM tell her yourself and spare me that incredibly sad and awkward conversation plz
**Kris:** if you get killed she’s gonna blame me and then I’m gonna get killed

**Noelle:** Why does everyone assume my mom would go on a murderous rampage if I got hurt???

**Kris:** uh have you met your mom?

**Noelle:** Believe it or not, I have! =:P
**Noelle:** Oh, tell Dess I love her too. Even when she eats all my snacks.

**Kris:** and me, are you going to tell me to tell myself that you said that you love me too?

**Noelle:** Don’t be silly.
**Noelle:** You already know. <3

She slipped her phone back in its holder on the belt of her costume, checked again that she had spare web cartridges, and then turned on the flashlight she had installed in the center of the belt buckle. It was a small bulb, but powerful, intended for situations just like this where she found herself having to maneuver in the dark - she just hoped it would be enough to light her way in there.

Noelle took a deep breath, stepped forward, and let the doors slide open and the shadows wash over her.

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**Kris:** Noelle I’m getting kinda freaked out. i thought this was just some lab accident but I was watching the news and they said you went in and you haven't come out yet.
Message not sent. Tap to try again.

**Kris:** Noelle? Do you need me to come over there?
Message not sent. Tap to try again.

**Kris:** I’m coming over there
Message not sent. Tap to try again.

# Chapter 5: The Scientist in Black

Noelle had never experienced such perfect darkness in her life. Her flashlight had quickly proven useless; she might as well have been struck blind, stumbling through a darkness that swallowed all light. She was tempted to turn back after taking just a few steps inside, but when she looked behind her for the exit, it was nowhere to be seen. Already consumed by impenetrable shadow.

Groping around in a panic, she had a moment of fear that she really had lost her eyesight. But that was impossible, wasn't it? And that monster she'd seen at the window earlier had been able to see her. The problem wasn't her eyes, it was this substance filling the building like impossibly dense smoke.

The stuff felt even stranger now that she was in the thick of it. It parted like vapor, but had a slight resistance to it; if it had been any thicker it might have felt more like swimming through water than walking through mist. Noelle worried about whether it was safe to breathe, but when she didn't immediately start to cough or choke or fall to the floor twitching, she had to assume that it wasn't toxic.

The weird thing was, despite being unable to see where she was going, she didn't run into anything in the dark. She had expected to be bumping into walls if she walked in any one direction too far, but that never happened. It was as if the building's interior had been replaced with a big empty void. After a while she stopped groping blindly with her arms out in front of her and began to just walk normally.

There was nowhere to walk *to,* but Noelle didn't have any better ideas. It was getting noticeably colder the further she went, uncomfortably chill even by Noelle's standards. She found herself shivering, and if she hadn't been wearing a mask, her breath would have been visible in the air, mingling with the wisps of shadow. At least the changing temperature indicated she wasn't just walking in circles.

"Hello?" she called out from time to time. "Is there anyone there? Can anybody hear me?"

She didn't get any reply. Not even an echo. But she knew she couldn't be alone in here. How many people worked in this massive complex of labs and offices? Hundreds, probably. They had to be somewhere.

Noelle tried to focus on that, instead of the primal panic starting to claw its way through her insides at the thought of being trapped in here. She had been prepared for a dark room; she hadn't been prepared for this claustrophobic place with its brain-breaking lack of physical dimensions, so vast and open that space had no meaning anymore.

She had checked her phone early on, but found that not only did it have no signal, she had to hold it up right in front of her eyes just to barely make out the

screen. At least that had confirmed for her that she wasn't entirely blind. But it also meant that she had no way to call for help. Not to mention no way to find help if it came, since she couldn't seem to find a single angeldamned person in this place.

But it didn't end up mattering, because after a while, something found her instead.

Noelle felt it before she heard it: Her spider-sense flared up in a warning tingle across her scalp. Seconds later, she heard a skittering sound, like many tiny feet against smooth tile flooring. It was difficult to judge distance in this void, but it sounded like it was getting closer. It wasn't a noise made by any type of monster Noelle had ever met, nor was it remotely close to human.

She braced herself as best she could, waiting for an attack she couldn't anticipate from a danger she couldn't see. As the sound grew nearer, Noelle saw something moving in the distance: a red glow, the first light she had seen since she'd entered this place. It would have been a welcome sight, if not for the bizarre shape that it illuminated.

The creature at first glance resembled a giant spider, the size of a large dog. But its form wasn't organic, but some strange, impossible amalgamation of typically inanimate objects. Its many legs were actually enormous syringes; their tiny needles tapping against the floor produced the unsettling sound she had heard. The thing's 'body' was a test tube, containing a red liquid that glowed as if irradiated; though it was only half-full, and the substance twisted and writhed and sloshed against the walls of the tube as though it had a life of its own. It reminded Noelle uncomfortably of the vials of blood that Gaster had taken from her when she'd been a prisoner in his laboratory. Had Gaster created this thing? Was this odd abomination some kind of messed-up science experiment?

She didn't have time to wonder, because as the creature scuttled towards her on its spindly needle legs, her spider-sense sent an almost electric twinge through her. She jumped aside just in time to avoid the spider-like thing raising one of its syringe arms and jabbing the needle at her.

"Where the heck did you come from?!" Noelle shouted as it rounded on her and charged again. She was pretty sure she'd had nightmares like this. Getting blood drawn by a doctor (or a mad scientist) was bad enough, but getting jabbed by a terrifying needle-spider was way, *way* farther down on her bucket list.

The creature stabbed at her again, but she was ready for it this time. She fired a quick glob of webbing that hit the needle's point and stuck to it like glue, blunting its ability to pierce her. Without the sharp ends, those syringes weren't much of a threat.

It jabbed again with its other front arm, but Noelle dodged to one side and repeated the motion with the web glue. "Stop trying to inject me! I'm already up to date on all my vaccinations!"

The spider settled onto its back legs, waving its front syringes impotently like an angry crab. The glow from the liquid in its body faded and brightened in a series

of quick pulses. Was it trying to communicate?

Suddenly it leapt, jumping through the air towards Noelle with all its remaining needle legs pointed down. Noelle yelped and instinctively sprang into a forwards roll, passing right underneath it as it pounced on the spot where she'd just been standing.

"Okay, time out!" Noelle yelled, already adjusting the settings on her web-shooters even as she came out of her roll and spun around. She raised her arms and sprayed a large net of webbing over the spider. It tried to struggle but all its legs quickly got tangled in the sticky strands, and before long it was immobilized, flailing helplessly.

Noelle cautiously approached it for a closer look. The creature emitted a hissing sound from Angel-knows-where and tried to wave its arms threateningly, but now that it was all tied up it looked more pathetic than scary.

"What even are you?" Noelle wondered aloud. "Are you really alive?"

She knelt by it, studying it up close, her fear giving way to curiosity. The creature appeared to relax a little when she made no immediate move to hurt it, and its pulsing test tube body settled into a more even glow again. Noelle reached out a hand to touch it.

That's when she noticed that what she'd mistaken for a cork stopping up the front of the test tube was actually a *face,* like a spider's, a multitude of round eyes staring up at her.

"Gaahh!" Noelle screamed, tripping over her hooves as she scrambled backwards. "Nope nope nope, too weird! Can't do it!"

She began to jog away from the spider-thing, but hesitantly, not wanting to be lost in the dark again, away from the soft glow the spider emitted. Something about its light seemed to drive the shadows back in a way that she couldn't replicate on her own. What if she ran into more of these things in the darkness? Worse, what if it took hours for her to stumble on another living thing again? Already she was losing track of how long she'd been in here, but her stomach was starting to rumble, and she knew she couldn't keep doing this forever.

But that spider…it had come from somewhere. It implied the existence of more in this place than just endless, empty void. And the way it had attacked her didn't feel like it was acting out of intelligent malice, but something more like animal instinct. Like it thought *she* was the predator.

An idea occurred to her. A stupid, crazy idea, but the only idea she had. Noelle turned around and walked back to the spider - slowly, so as not to scare it. "Hey, um, little buddy," she said in what she hoped was a soothing, 'not going to eat you' kind of voice. "If I…if I let you out of that web, will you promise not to stab me?"

The spider considered her for a moment, then made a sort of chirping noise, its test tube glow pulsing once.

“I guess that’s a yes,” Noelle said. She had better not regret this…

She switched her web-shooter nozzles to the dissolving spray she had developed to get rid of unwanted webs, and gave the spider a good spritz all over. Instantly, the web fluid began to disintegrate, freeing it from the net.

She had expected it to immediately run away or attack again, but instead, it scuttled cautiously nearer, test tube body pointed down towards the ground in front of her hooves.

“Um…okay,” Noelle said, crouching and reaching down to pet the glowing tube. It felt like glass - which as far as she could tell, it was. “Good little…whatever you are. See, isn’t it nicer to not fight?”

The syringe-spider rubbed up against her leg in agreement. It was still the weirdest thing Noelle had ever seen, but it was a lot less menacing when it was acting like a friendly puppy.

“Hey,” she asked it, feeling a little silly but not knowing what else to try, “have you seen anyone else in here today?” She pointed at herself and then out into the void. “Other people? Like me?”

The spider perked up, then turned and began to scurry away, its little needle feet going *tink tink tink tink tink* as it ran.

“Hey wait up!” Noelle shouted, hurrying after it. “Where are you going?”

The spider paused, turned to confirm that she was following, then hurried off into the dark again. It moved fast, but Noelle had run track even before she had super-strength, so she was accustomed to sprinting. She ran after it, keeping that red glow in sight.

It led her in a seemingly random direction for what felt like many long minutes, but whenever she began to get tired and slow down, her strange new friend stopped to wait for her to catch up before hurrying onward. There appeared to be intent and purpose to the direction it was headed, even if to Noelle’s eyes it was impossible to tell right from left in this place. Maybe it had senses she didn’t. Regardless, she just hoped that it was leading her to something useful and not, say, into a trap.

After a while, though, something appeared on the horizon. A glow, pale and faint - but after so long in near-total darkness, it might as well have been a floodlight, calling her like a beacon. As she drew closer, shapes became distinct in that soft glow, objects towering up among the shadows. The tall, misshapen forms resembled small buildings at first glance, and Noelle almost mistook it for some kind of town. But on closer inspection she realized that what she was seeing weren’t buildings at all, but the sprawling arms of a vast, twisted machine, metal and chrome and wires bent in ways that looked like the architectural design of a madman. They weaved in and out of patches of dense shadow, plunging beneath the ground and back up again further away, such that they appeared to be distinct structures, but were all interconnected, like the roots of a tree.

And at the center of that web of tangled machinery was a huge circular ring. Lights around its circumference were the source of the glow, even though the circle was full of liquid darkness spilling outwards and up like a fountain underwater, shadows bubbling out and mixing with the void all around it. Huge cables rose from it like the strings of a marionette, disappearing into the darkness above. Even in this impossibly transformed state, Noelle recognized the machine: Doctor Gaster's M.E.C.C.A. reactor, or a rebuilt and redesigned version of it.

Gaster himself stood before the machine, bent over a computer terminal; unlike the rest of the small jungle of draping tubes and wires around him, it didn't appear to be connected to anything. He looked taller than usual, but at the same time hunchbacked. The shadows swirled all around him like wraiths of smoke, and darkness had draped itself around his clothing like a shroud - aside from his pale face and hands, he blended into his surroundings so well that it was difficult to make out the dimensions of his body.

"Ah yes, wonderful," Gaster was muttering to himself. "Truly wonderful. These readings are beyond my wildest dreams. This limitless energy…the pure substance of life itself…" He raised his hand to trail it slowly through the air, watching the way the thick darkness flowed around his bony fingers. "We have so much to do. So much to learn. I always hoped one day to study other worlds, but never did I imagine that I could create one."

Noelle crept closer, hiding behind banks of machinery. Some instinct told her to hang back and watch, to see what Gaster would do. Something felt wrong about him - the way he was talking to himself felt tinged with a disturbing note of madness.

But that wasn't even the *most* disturbing part. As Noelle peered closer, she was able to make out figures in the dark around the machines, and with a shock, she realized that what she had mistaken for especially active patches of smoky shadow were in fact solid forms, coated with oily darkness from head to toe like a semi-liquid coating. The deeper she peered into the shadows, the more figures she was able to make out; hundreds of them, most just standing around as though awaiting instructions. They were mostly humanoid beings that walked on two legs, but she could see monster features among their forms as well: horns and antlers, wings and tails. All of them looked like they had just staggered out of a tar pit, dripping black ooze.

"Are those…the employees?" Noelle whispered to herself, horrified.

Her spider creature friend, who had been hanging back away from the machinery, gave a soft chirp like a warning and skittered up the side of a massive pillar of electronic chips and exposed wiring. Noelle looked around to see what had scared it off, and spotted more glowing lights headed their way; ones of different colors, some a sickly green or yellow, some a pale gray or soft orange. They were accompanied by that familiar pitter-patter of syringe legs.

Maybe her friend had the right idea; she might have been able to tame one of these creatures, but didn't want to take her chances with a whole pack of them. So instead, Noelle crawled on hooves and hands up the side of the nearest bank

of blinking lights and half-finished chassis, hiding up in the shadows where she could watch and see what was happening below.

She had to hold back the urge to gasp when she heard a familiar, nasally voice echo through the darkness in loud complaint. “Unhand me this instant, foul monstrosity! I *demand* to be released immediately! I have friends in high places, do you hear me? They’ll come to my rescue and y-you’ll regret ever messing with me! You’ll never get away with this!”

*Oh no.* Well, at least she’d finally found Berdly. The bad news was that it appeared the other strange denizens of this realm had found him first; as they drew nearer to the glow of the reactor, Noelle saw that he was being dragged between two of those oil-slick figures, flanked by a small horde of syringe-spiders.

Gaster turned to face the source of the disturbance, and Noelle watched the way Berdly’s bluster stopped immediately when he saw Gaster scrutinizing him.

“Ah yes,” Gaster said, “the young bluebird. Bernard, was it?”

“Wha-?” Berdly sputtered. “It - it’s *Berdly!* Berdly Cristata! I work for you!”

“Forgive me,” Gaster said absent-mindedly. “Even as I can feel my mind expanding, I find myself with little space for the recollection of…unimportant matters. A great many people work for me.” He gestured at the crowd of uniformly goopy shadow monsters. “And those who do not…will join me soon enough.”

“Join him?” Noelle whispered to herself. Join him as what? Faceless automatons? Something was seriously wrong with Gaster; say what you will about him, she had never known him to be callous about the safety of his own employees. She couldn’t tell if the people who had been transformed somehow were still themselves under that coating of viscous darkness, but she had to find a way to save them if she could.

“Um, so, Dr. Gaster, s-sir,” Berdly chirped nervously. “What…what are you working on?”

“A new pet project of mine,” Gaster said. “Creating a nascent reality.”

He turned his back on Berdly and strode closer to the glowing ring of the reactor, gazing up at it. As he moved and the lights reflected off his shadow-shrouded body, Noelle noticed that Gaster’s form had that same oily sheen to it, only visible when it caught the light. Whatever substance had enveloped the workers and scientists, it was attached to him as well.

“I can see it all so clearly now,” Gaster said quietly. It felt more like he was speaking to himself than to Berdly. “My eyes have been opened. This place, this substance all around us…it wants to feed, to grow and spread and come alive.” One of the spider creatures scuttled over and rubbed itself against his leg, and he reached down to pet its oversized test tube body. “I’ve already dreamt up one life form - after a sort, and with the limited materials at hand. It is crude, yes, but

astonishing. Once I learn to control and direct this power, to guide it like a proper Creator should…why, I can change the world with this. Make a better world, like I've always dreamt of…"

"Are…are you sure it's s-safe?" Berdly asked, squirming in the grip of the two monsters who held his wings at his sides. One of them appeared to be quietly melting like an ice cream cone left in the sun, bits of dark sludge dripping off their form and then crawling back along the ground like little slugs to fuse with the body again.

"Safe?" Gaster's laugh echoed through the void. "A true pioneer does not let safety stand in the way of innovation. This breakthrough is too significant to dilute through tepid caution. You will understand, once you have been bonded."

Berdly's feathers fluffed up and his eyes widened. "What do you mean, bonded?"

"To the essence of creation," Gaster said calmly, as if that explained everything. "We will show you." He absently waved away his half-melted minions. "Take him and add him to our ranks."

*Oh no you don't!* The shadow monsters started dragging Berdly away as he squawked in panicked protest, but Noelle wasn't about to let her friend suffer whatever fate they had in mind for him. It was time to put a stop to this madness.

"Dr. Gaster!" she shouted, drawing his attention. When he looked up, she swung down from the shadows of the towering machinery, aiming for the figures accosting Berdly. She took them down with a double-hoofed kick to the head; she pulled the punch to keep from hurting them - they were innocent victims in all this, after all - but her momentum was enough to knock them off their feet and send them sprawling.

Noelle landed in a crouch on the ground, surprising the syringe-spiders and making them scuttle back, the glowing lights of their bodies retreating.

Berdly wrenched himself free from his captors as they fell and hurried over to her. "Noelle! Thank the Angel you're here! I knew you would save me!"

"We're not out of the woods yet, Berdly," Noelle warned, turning to face Gaster. She felt exposed now that she was out in the open, with Berdly hiding behind her back and potential threats all around them. She could rely on her spider-sense to warn her of sneak attacks, but what about him? She would have to be very careful here; if her enemies mobbed her, she wasn't sure she'd be able to defend herself and Berdly at the same time.

"Noelle Holiday," Gaster proclaimed, looking down at her. "Or should I call you Spider-Doe?" Was it her imagination or was he getting taller? Like the shadows were bunching up around his legs, raising him up into the air slightly. Now that she was closer to him, she could see that what she'd mistaken for a liquid-like coating of shadow was actually a sort of web of threads like thick vines; they were crawling up his neck, growing over the white bone of his skull, yet he didn't seem to notice or care.

“What should I call *you?”* Noelle challenged. “Because you don’t seem to be yourself right now, Doctor.”

“I am still me,” Gaster said calmly. “But I am also more. Something…other. It is not a reduction, Noelle. It is a multiplication. An expansion.” He extended his hand out to her; tendrils of darkness emerged from his fingertips, wriggling like excited worms. “Would you like to see for yourself?”

Her spider-sense flared up from an ambient tingle to a sudden stab, and Noelle leapt aside, dragging Berdly with her, just as those disturbing tentacles shot forward like stretched rubber, lashing out as though to grab hold of her.

“Gahh!” Berdly screeched, watching as the tendrils groped blindly through the air, before just as abruptly snapping back into Gaster’s hand. “What is wrong with him?!”

“He’s changing,” Noelle said, less an explanation than an observation; the ropes of darkness had almost entirely consumed Gaster now, blotting out his white bones and pulling the corners of his mouth back into a skeletal rictus of a grin. “Berdly, how did all of this start?”

Berdly glanced around nervously, trying to keep an eye on every side of the room as he compulsively plucked at his feathers. “I witnessed our mad scientist friend activating the reactor, just before it started spilling out shadows like an unplugged geyser.” He glanced up at the towering ring above Gaster. “That machine was intended to draw power from other dimensions, correct? Maybe it did its job too well.”

“Something breached the portal and entered our world…” Noelle said. It sounded fantastical, some mad, impossible nightmare, but it was the only theory that explained what was happening. She’d never seen anything like this before - but then, if the phenomenon was otherworldly in origin, that would make sense. “How do we reverse it?”

“You cannot reverse an act of God, you silly girl,” Gaster’s voice boomed. The shadow covering him now looked less like clothing than a massive, writhing growth that had glommed onto his body - tentacles both big and small sprouted from his back and arms, twisting around in the air as though enraged. “This is *my* world! I won’t let you take my discovery from me!”

His shadow tendrils lashed out again. This time Noelle was ready for them and made to dodge, but there were too many, all moving independently of one another - even as she jumped away from one, another flew in like a dark streak of lightning and slammed into her. The thing was more solid than it looked, and the impact hit her like a baseball bat colliding with a ball, sending her flying backwards. Her back slammed against the side of one of the huge banks of machinery, and for a split-second she saw stars.

“Noelle!” Berdly cried out, dashing to her side. Before he could reach her, another tentacle wrapped around his waist, lifted him off his feet and flicked him casually away. He flapped his arms frantically and was able to slow his fall enough to right himself in the air, but the syringe spiders had begun to scurry

back in from the shadows again, and the distance between him and Noelle left Berdly vulnerable.

The bright side, if she could call it that, is that they didn't seem interested in him. Instead, all the spiders and shadow-people were rushing right past Berdly - heading straight for Noelle instead. She struggled to her feet and braced herself.

Gaster turned away from her, already losing interest. "I'll let my associates subdue you. There is still so much important work to be done. We must build an army, yes…an army to herald the Black King's crowning…"

Noelle didn't have time to focus on his insane rambling. A spider reached her first, pouncing like the one she'd fought earlier. She let herself fall backwards, kicking up at the same time so that her hooves pushed against its body and used its own momentum to send it flying over her head - a handy move that Kris had taught her.

She sprang back up to her hooves just in time to get attacked by a second spider. It was only one of many; a whole ring of them crowded around from all sides, threatening to swarm her. But this time she saw an opportunity, and instead of ducking, she dodged to the side as it pounced, and turned and snagged it with a webline as it flew by, connecting it to her like a ball on a rope.

More spiders rushed in, but Noelle used the momentum of the creature's leap to pivot and swing it around on her webbing, using it like a flail. She swung the spider in a circle, crashing into others and driving them back on all sides of her. The collisions caused some of their test tube bodies to shatter, and as she spun Noelle caught glimpses of the colorful glowing liquids inside them quickly oozing away into the dark, like animate jelly.

She finally released her battered makeshift weapon, sending it flying in a random direction. The spiders were hanging back now, but Noelle didn't get more than a moment to catch her breath before a trio of humanoid shadow men charged in to try their luck instead. One of them threw a punch at her head, but Noelle ducked and rammed an elbow into it, sending it stumbling away. While she was crouched low she shot a web rope around the ankles of the second, making it trip and fall face-first. But the third creature had circled around behind her while she dealt with the other two. Only her spider-sense kept her from falling prey to a sneak attack. She spun around and threw a punch directly towards her enemy's chest, hoping to stagger them.

Instead, her arm sank into the figure's chest up to her wrist.

Noelle cried out in shock and alarm, trying to pull her hand free, but she was stuck fast. Her faceless opponent might as well have been made of sticky tar. But she was worse than just stuck; she was under attack. The figure made no move to strike her, but she watched in terror as the black substance of its body began to crawl up her arm like a living ooze, slowly enveloping her. It wasn't painful - whatever the stuff was, it didn't burn or freeze at the touch - but she felt this horrible, panicked certainty that if she didn't get it off now, before it was too late, it would be stuck to her forever. 'Bonded,' as Gaster had called it.

Noelle tugged and shouted, screamed and struggled in protest, but the black tar continued its slow crawl up her arm. She couldn't get away, couldn't stop it.

And then a blue streak flashed above her head. Noelle cowered down to avoid the frantic flapping of wings and clawing of nubby little talons as Berdly swooped to her rescue, slashing wildly at her captor's featureless head. "Release her at once, you gross goopy goon!"

To her surprise, the oozing tendrils of shadow actually retreated down her arm a little as the main body staggered backwards, and she felt its grip around her hand weaken. With a super-strong tug, Noelle wrenched her arm free - although in so doing she shed the glove of her costume, leaving her lower arm bare save for the web-shooter she always wore underneath her costume. She felt suddenly foolish. If it hadn't happened so fast and taken her by surprise, if she hadn't panicked and had kept her head, she might have thought to remove her glove before the tendrils spread too far up her arm.

Well, she would know better than to try a direct punch again, especially since she couldn't use that glove trick twice. But how was she supposed to fight enemies she couldn't hit?

First things first, though. Berdly made for an excellent distraction, but she didn't want to merely trade places with him and let him get stuck instead. So before the shadow figure he had knocked off balance could recover and strike back, she grabbed him around the middle and swung both of them up into the high banks of machinery on a web line. There, her hooves sticking to the surface with Berdly in her arms, she could finally catch her breath and assess the situation.

Or she could if Berdly stopped babbling long enough to let her focus. "N-Noelle!" he stammered. "Thank goodness you're okay! I thought for sure that weird monster was going to absorb you, like in that one old movie with the giant blob from outer space that eats people, have you seen that one? I always thought that movie was a bit offensive to slime monsters, but I guess a space blob and a slime aren't the same thing. Like how slimes are transparent and definitely don't eat people, though I *have* seen them eat before and I don't want to sound bigoted or anything but I have to say it was disturbing…"

"Berdly!" Noelle snapped. "I know you talk when you're scared but please, I need to think." Already the spider creatures were regrouping below, while all the shadow monsters had unnervingly stopped to stare up at them with their featureless faces.

"Ah, right, of course," Berdly chirped. He climbed out of her arms and perched on a massive cable running between two of the towering machines, like a bird on the telephone wire. "What is the plan, my fearless friend?"

Noelle looked down at Gaster, who was hunched over his control panels and computer screens; it all looked like someone had fused a bunch of disparate technology together into a jumbled mishmash, but he seemed able to make sense of it. And whatever he was doing was supercharging the M.E.C.C.A. reactor. The lights around its circumference pulsed faster, like they were trying not to drown in the stream of shadows bubbling up out of the ring.

A cold shiver of realization ran down the length of Noelle's spine. Gaster didn't have to defeat her; he was throwing all his minions at her because he was stalling for time. Every minute she wasted fighting was a minute he spent growing this expanse of shadow. As impossible and seemingly endless as the dimensions of this dark place were, she knew logically that she was still inside Gastcorp, that the phenomenon was confined to the interior of the building. But if it built up enough pressure to break free…

"I think it's time we took this fight to its source," she told Berdly, pointing down at the reactor. "All this creepy shadow stuff is still pouring through that portal. We have to send it back where it came from and shut the door behind it."

"Can we do that?" Berdly whispered. "Is there some way to…reverse the polarity or something? Turn the portal into a vacuum and suck all the shadows back up?"

That…didn't sound very scientific to Noelle, but she didn't want to discourage Berdly from having hope, so she said, "I don't know. But a device like that must have some kind of failsafes. Some way to shut it down quickly in case of an emergency." She nodded towards Gaster. "And I bet I know who would be able to do that."

"If you can talk some sense into him first."

Noelle furrowed her brow, staring down at the out of control scientist. "Or beat some sense into him."

Beneath her exhaustion and her fear of this strange, overwhelming situation, she found that she was angry. Once again, Gaster's unchecked ambition was getting people hurt. All the man ever did was meddle with things he shouldn't touch, trying to bend dangerous forces to his will. He'd done it with her, when he kidnapped her to try and unlock the secret of her superpowers, and now he was doing it again with something even more volatile. He didn't seem to care what his "experiments" cost.

It was past time she put a stop to it.

"Listen," she told Berdly, pointing down at the base of the reactor. "See those cables leading up towards the ceiling? It looks like those are supplying power to the reactor. Even in this weird nightmare logic world, a machine can't be powered by nothing, so there has to be a source. I bet if you climb up those power lines, you'll find that source."

Berdly followed her gaze upwards, to where the cables disappeared into the darkness high above. He gulped. "If *I* climb them?"

"Yes, Berdly. You wanted to be on the team, didn't you? Well this is your chance to be a hero."

"I…" Berdly hesitated. Then he drew in a deep breath, fluffed up his feathers, and said, "What do you need me to do?"

"Get up there and find some way to disconnect those cables or shut off whatever they're attached to. You'll be okay. You have wings, so even if you slip and fall

you shouldn't be in any danger."

"Easy for you to say, Noelle," Berdly muttered. "You're practically a better flier than I am these days."

"That's not what you said when Martlet asked - oh, nevermind. I saw you break your fall when Gaster threw you earlier. You'll be fine."

As she said this, Noelle turned her attention to ripping off a chunk of metal from the exterior casing of the nearest machine.

"What are you doing?" Berdly hissed, shooting a glance at the creatures below as though afraid the noise would draw them. When she looked over her shoulder, though, Noelle saw they were still milling about on the ground. Perhaps they would leave her alone as long as she wasn't directly interfering with their master.

"Take this," Noelle said, pulling off her other glove and handing it to Berdly along with the jagged shard of metal she'd just torn free. "In case you need to cut through any wiring. The glove is made with rubber, so it should protect you from touching any electrical currents." She hesitated for a second before adding, "Probably. I've been meaning to add the same insulation to the rest of the suit, but I haven't stress-tested it yet."

Berdly took the glove, but he looked nervous. "Are you sure this plan is safe, Noelle?"

"Safety isn't really part of the superhero job description," Noelle sighed. "But I think that if we don't do this, we might never be getting out of here. And I don't know about you, but I'd like to see the sun again."

Berdly shuddered. "I…would also like that. Very much."

"Then go. And be careful. Yell for me if you run into trouble, but I don't think anything will come after you. I'm about to draw their attention."

"R-Roger that," Berdly said. "Good luck, Spider-Doe! If you need assistance, simply give this bird call signal" - he made an exaggerated 'caw-caw' sound twice - "and I shall happily come swooping down to your rescue again!"

"We don't need a secret signal, Berdly. If I need help I'll just shout your name, okay?"

Berdly pouted, a funny-looking expression on a monster with a beak. "Can I at least get a cool codename when we're out in the field? Something like The Blue Blur, or perhaps The Avian Avenger?"

"Keep workshopping those," Noelle said. "We can talk codenames if we survive the night."

With that, she stopped wasting time and leapt away, swinging down from the machinery to land behind Gaster's hunched, distracted form. "Dr. Gaster! You have to stop this!"

Gaster slowly turned to look at her. His body had become an amorphous black mass, and his normally pale white skull and dark eyes were entirely covered with shadow, inverting the color scheme: his head was now black, but his eyes were marked by white patterns like jagged, curling drops of ink in water. The markings seemed to move slightly as she watched, holding their basic shape but shifting around the edges.

Gaster smiled, the darkness pulling back like lips, exposing white teeth that seemed to have unnaturally elongated in his mouth, becoming sharp points. “Stop? Why would I want it to stop? Would you be so cruel as to demand that I smother a newborn dimension in its crib? Can’t you see what I’m trying to build?”

“This isn’t right!” Noelle said, waving her bare hand to gesture at the shadowed space around them. “I don’t know where all of this came from, but surely you can see it doesn’t belong here. We have to put it back!”

“Back…” Gaster repeated. “Back in the box, where no one ever goes.” His tone was dark, but unfocused; he sounded distracted again, like he was having a conversation with himself that Noelle could only hear half of. “But life wants to live, doesn’t it? Even life that has never lived before knows it wants that. It would be wrong to deny it. You can’t build a legacy by never taking risks.”

“Look around you! Look what you’re doing - to your company, to your city! This isn’t building something new, this is destruction. But it’s not too late to stop! If you don’t, your only legacy will be catastrophe!”

“You don’t understand, Noelle. You’re just as blind as everyone else. It doesn’t matter. Protest all you want. You’ll see the truth eventually.”

“Doctor,” Noelle pleaded, “you’re not yourself. This stuff is affecting you, it’s messing with your mind like a drug or something. Please, think logically. You have one of the most brilliant minds monsterkind ever produced, please, you can’t let yourself succumb like this. I know you’re stronger than that!”

“Stronger,” Gaster sighed. “Stronger, yet stronger. Yes, I am stronger now. My thoughts go so much faster and further than before. I see it all, just outside my reach. A universe of possibilities.” He grinned at Noelle and bent low as tentacles of thick congealed shadow *burst* from his back like parasites digging their way out of a host body. The wiggly black ropes reached all the way down to the ground, lifting him off his feet and high into the air above, bearing his weight like spindly spider legs.

“Would you like to see it too, little spider?” Gaster said. His voice had a deep, rumbling echo to it, two voices overlaid on top of each other. “We can show you. We can make you stronger than you ever thought possible.”

Noelle gulped. So much for talking him down. It was worth a try, but she should have known it wouldn’t work. In her brief time as a superhero, she’d found that things like this usually had to be done the hard way.

She gave a quick glance upwards, past Gaster, where she could just barely make out Berdly's form in the darkness, climbing up one of those huge cables, the shard of metal clenched in his beak. Maybe if she could keep Gaster distracted long enough, they would still have a chance.

Noelle cracked her knuckles. All right then. All things considered, Gaster was long overdue for a punch in the face anyways.

He ran towards her on spidery legs, two more tendrils sprouting out to grab her. Noelle rolled to one side to avoid them and came up ready in a crouch, firing a web rope like a bolas at two of Gaster's tentacle legs - all those legs looked precarious, and perhaps if she could trip him up and bring him crashing back down to the ground, she could subdue him.

For a second, she almost thought it was going to work. Gaster stumbled, his tentacle legs bound together. But then he righted himself as the tentacles simply pushed *through* the porous gaps in the webbing, reforming on the other side and leaving the webs to fall loosely to the ground.

"Is that the best trick you have, Holiday?" Gaster's weird double-voice taunted her. "Bouncing around throwing ineffectual scraps of adhesive at everything? And to think I once thought your powers enviable."

A tentacle lashed out suddenly, swinging at her so fast that she barely saw it coming. Even with the heads up from her spider-sense, she didn't quite have time to duck. The blow connected with her head; thankfully her antler caught the brunt of it and deflected some of the impact, but it was still enough to send her rolling head over hooves.

Noelle shook it off, picking herself up off the floor, but before she could avoid it, another tentacle wrapped around her left leg and yanked her off the ground. She cried out in surprise as she was dangled upside down, lifted up to face Gaster.

"I used to think you were so fascinating," he said. There was no anger in his voice, just cold, dispassionate observation. "Worthy of study. But in the end you're not much of anything, are you? Just yesterday's discovery, already obsolete."

"I've done more to help people than you and your company ever have!" Noelle blurted out. Saying that made her feel egotistical, but ego was the language this man understood. If she could just keep him talking…

"Why? Because you've stopped a few muggings and pulled a few monsters from burning buildings? Please. You're nothing but one decent invention and some unearned luck, all wrapped up in a protective web of nauseating, brainless celebrity hero worship. You would still be a nobody if it wasn't for me. Gastcorp *made* you!"

Gaster laughed, his eerie smile spreading wider, and oh gosh, those teeth were *really* sharp. It made Noelle think, irrationally, of Susie. Her classmate may have been a bully, but Susie wouldn't have taken any crap from an egomaniac like Gaster. Maybe Noelle could channel that. Keep him angry enough to hold his

attention. Even hanging upside down in front of his face, she still had some power here.

“And you can’t stand that, can you?” Noelle fired back. “Is that why you’re trying so hard to steal back the spotlight? Why you’re pushing your research further and further into dangerous uncharted waters? You hate the fact that your most popular creation was a total accident.”

“Of *course* you were an accident!” Gaster snarled. “You’re nothing but an entitled brat riding the high of unearned fame and stolen power. Everything you are, every advantage and privilege you have, is built off the back of other people’s hard work. My research, your mother’s status, your little hero friend’s branding. You’re not original, you’re not deserving. You’re just a pretender. A *fake.”*

Noelle gritted her teeth, glad her expression wasn’t visible through her mask. Even though she’d been trying to provoke such a reaction from him, it still hurt to hear those words coming from a man she’d once looked up to.

But she could give just as good as she got. “There it is, then,” she said. “There’s the truth. You’re just a man who can’t stand seeing anyone else have something he doesn’t. You know what I think? I think you’re *afraid.* You’re scared that you’ll be left behind, that if you don’t keep evolving and innovating, you’ll become so commonplace that no one cares about Gastcorp anymore. Your company used to be the marvel of monsterkind. But what’s so impressive about scientists in a world of superheroes?”

Gaster let out a growl from somewhere deep in his throat. The man of intellect and reason was no longer in the driver’s seat; this was a sound of raw animalistic anger. “You’re a failed experiment, Noelle,” he rasped, his voice like grinding bones. “It’s time you were disposed of.”

He opened his mouth wide, jaw unhinging to show off those razor-sharp teeth, and for a terrible moment, Noelle thought he was going to bite her. But then, upside-down in her vision, she watched in horror as something uncurled from the dark depths of Gaster’s mouth - a long tongue of bone, like a miniature spine or prehensile tail. The flexible bony limb reached for her face, and Noelle couldn’t help but flinch away, terrified.

At that moment, without warning, all the lights on the reactor went out. The machine’s loud hum abruptly stopped, and all was plunged into utter, silent darkness.

“No…” Gaster breathed, turning to look at the inactive reactor. “No, no, what did you do?” The tentacle holding Noelle’s ankle shook her as she dangled in the air. “What have you done?!”

*Berdly must have succeeded,* Noelle thought. Bless that beautiful buffoon of a bluebird. As frustrating as he could be, he always came through for her when it mattered most.

“I need to see…” Gaster was muttering. “Need light…” He gave a whistle and the spider creatures who had been lurking around the perimeter scurried in, crawling up over the reactor, the faint glow from the colored liquid in their bodies illuminating it like a strange, circular Christmas tree. Noelle could see now that whatever portal had been open was now shut; the flow of liquid shadow had halted, like a running faucet being shut off. The fountain had gone still.

But the darkness still lingered. The world wasn’t returning to normal. There had to be a way to reverse this, but the answer eluded her. What was she missing? What else could she do?

Gaster dropped her unexpectedly, and Noelle flipped in midair to land on her hooves. She righted herself and glanced up to find the insane scientist leaning over his control console, his shadow tentacles withdrawing into his back. Something *was* changing, she realized - not with the environment, but with him.

“I…what am I doing?” Gaster said quietly. He sounded confused, talking to himself rather than to her; indeed, it was like he had forgotten she was even there. Why else would he turn his back on someone he had been trying to kill just moments ago? “I was going to…to do something. Something important…”

That strange parasitic liquid shadow was sloughing off him, melting away to reveal his real face again, white bone and normal, unsharpened teeth. Noelle looked around to see that it was the same with the others, the monsters of shadow who had been standing there awaiting their master’s orders. Now they were raising their arms, turning their heads, looking disoriented and confused as the slimy darkness melted off them, revealing fur and feathers and frightened but uninjured faces.

Noelle felt a gust of air in the darkness beside her as Berdly dropped from the shadows above, wings flapping. He sidled up close to her, shivering in the cold air and looking around nervously. “Noelle! You were right about the power supply! I cut it loose like you said. Did that…work?”

“It did something,” she said in a low voice. “Something good, I think.”

Gaster was still standing before them in his lab coat, tall but no longer looking so unnaturally elongated. He didn’t appear angry or upset, but confused and troubled, one arm hugging his middle and the other hand clamped over his mouth, a look of growing horror in his wide, dark eyes.

“Dr. Gaster,” Noelle called, stepping forward. “Are you okay?”

He looked at her, surprised, as though just now remembering her presence there. “Spider-Doe. I…I fear I may have made a terrible mistake.”

Noelle took another tentative step closer, testing the waters. Her spider-sense was no longer tingling, and on his own, without those freaky powers, Gaster was no threat to her. “So, you’re thinking clearly again?”

He nodded slowly. “It was like…like my thoughts were not my own. Like there was a voice in my head, overriding my reason.” He narrowed his eyes at her, a

hint of anger flaring up in those dark depths. “Inflaming my emotions.”

“I don’t expect you to like me,” Noelle told him. Whether he’d been in his right mind or not, the jabs they had exchanged hadn’t come from nowhere. “But right now I just want everything to go back to normal.” She gestured at the dark expanse around them. “Do you know what to do? Is there a way to make all this right?”

Gaster gave a dry-heave of a laugh. “My dear girl, I know no more than you do. Though it pains me to admit it, I am completely out of my scientific depth here. I suspect I may have stumbled on the discovery of a new element, but it would take months, maybe years of study and tests before I could even begin to formulate a theory on how this substance functions or the nature of its…reality-altering properties.”

“Oh,” Noelle said, feeling her hopes sink. “So then, you can’t control it?”

“I believe it was controlling *me,”* Gaster remarked. “But that is not to say I have learned nothing. I remember…glimpses of something. Something vast.” He frowned, his expression becoming unfocused, like he was trying to make out shapes on a horizon impossibly far away. “Even now the memory fades like a bad dream. But for a brief time I had knowledge. Knowledge like I had never dreamed of…

“One lasting impression remains. That we are dealing with something not merely scientific, but spiritual. I believe there are laws that all things must obey, that everything is governed by and explained through scientific principles. But there are other forces as well, ones we do not yet fully understand.” He leaned down to look her in the eye. “Can you feel it, Noelle? That vibration in your SOUL?”

Her SOUL…

Little was known about a monster’s SOUL, only that it manifested as a white heart-shaped crystal. It was like the battery of a monster’s body, the force holding everything together. In Angelism, the dominant monster religion, the SOUL was considered a fragment of the Angel’s body, a sliver of God imbued in each living thing. Humans had them too, although theirs were even less well-studied in the monster sciences.

Noelle unconsciously pressed a hand to her chest, feeling her heartbeat through her costume. If she focused, she could attune herself to its rhythm. But her SOUL didn’t feel any different; just a steady beat, as always. Even the biological changes that had given her superpowers hadn’t appeared to have any effect on her SOUL.

“No, of course you wouldn’t feel it,” Gaster mused. “You haven’t been touched by this new substance, like I have. I feel it even now. An attunement.” He slowly scooped his hands through the air, bringing his palms together like a bowl, and Noelle saw that the darkness, the shadow floating freely in the atmosphere around them, congealed like a pool of dark water in his hands. “It is as though the divinity in me is calling out to the divinity around me.”

Noelle took a step closer, curious, peering down at the substance in Gaster's hands. Up close, she could see that it moved on its own like a rolling ocean, constantly in motion, little waves cresting the surface and tiny tendrils reaching up, grasping at nothing. It both repulsed her and fascinated her, the disturbing unnaturalness of it warring with her inner scientist's desire to understand it.

"Is it…holy?" she breathed. "Like the SOUL?"

"Perhaps," Gaster said. "Or perhaps it is natural, merely a part of nature we've never encountered before. Whatever it is, it is dangerous…but only in the way that fire is dangerous, or water. A force that is part of the fabric of the world, capable of either consuming us or being harnessed by us. When it was… consuming me earlier, I felt like I was drowning in it, like it had set my SOUL ablaze. But now I wonder if I was simply unprepared for the experience."

"It should be studied," Noelle decided. "But safely. Not here, not like this. We need Gastcorp to be Gastcorp again, so this thing you've found can be contained."

"I agree," Gaster said. "We mustn't let it get out of control like this again. But how to clean up this mess is the question. I think…" He hesitated for the barest moment before continuing. "I think I may be able to control it, but not without help. I've already proven to be…ill-prepared to wield that power alone." He reached a hand out to Noelle, still dripping with that black gelatinous substance. "I hear you've learned a few things recently about bearing the burden of power. Will you help me fix my mistakes?"

"Wait, Noelle," Berdly chirped from behind her. "Are you sure about this?"

Noelle hesitated, looking at Gaster's outstretched hand. At the unpredictable power he was offering her a taste of. The way that power had started to transform him had been frightening, but wasn't that just proof that he couldn't be trusted to use it alone? Gaster was corruptible, driven by ego and self-interest; it was no wonder this new element had nearly driven him mad. But all Noelle wanted was to set things right and make sure everyone was safe. And if this was the only way to do that…

"Don't be afraid," Gaster told her. "The worst thing you can do in the face of the unknown is to fear it. Whatever this power is, it isn't evil. It doesn't want to hurt us. I think… I think it only wants the same thing we all want. To be understood."

It would be nice, wouldn't it, Noelle thought, as she stared into those oily, shifting depths. To understand something for once. To understand her place in all these events, this rapidly growing world she had been thrust into. To understand what she was meant to do, who Spider-Doe was meant to be.

What she could become on her own, without Kris. Maybe that was the source of her discontent lately, the discomfort she'd felt trying to fill Spider-Human's shoes. Maybe her SOUL knew that she had her own destiny, beyond just copying someone else's. And maybe this was part of that. A step into the unknown. A leap of faith.

Noelle took a deep breath and tightly clasped Gaster's outstretched hand with her bare palm. She almost recoiled when she felt the shadow-substance press against her fur, a thick slimy ooze that triggered an instinctive disgust. But Gaster held her fast in his grip.

That little handful of darkness squished between their palms began to spread, somehow increasing its own mass, growing in size. It moved fast, faster than Noelle could have expected, eagerly traveling up their arms, enveloping their shoulders, coating their torsos like wet paint. She could hear Berdly squawking her name, and Noelle began to panic, suddenly fearful, yanking her hand out of Gaster's grasp. But it was much too late for that to stop whatever process had begun. She could feel the stuff crawling over her, wrapping itself tight around her costume, slipping under the seams and tickling her skin.

She screamed as the inky slime covered her mask and blotted out what little light remained.

# Chapter 6: The Other

Kris swung through the city as fast as they could, squinting to protect their eyes from the wind whipping against their unmasked face. The winter air was freezing this time of night, the rush of wind biting right through their sweater. Part of them missed their costume, with its thermal insulation and form-fitting stretchiness that made it easier to dive and somersault through the air in comfort, no matter the weather. They could have brought it with them to Noelle's house. Could have easily slipped it into their backpack, instead of leaving it to gather dust in their closet at home.

But they had told themself they wouldn't put that mask on again, and they meant to keep that promise.

It hadn't been an all-at-once decision. It had crept up on them. 'Taking a break until I can convince Mom to stop worrying' had turned into 'taking some time to enjoy just being normal until the media spotlight moves on' had turned into 'sick queasy feeling in the pit of my stomach whenever I think about putting on a mask and throwing myself off a building' had turned, gradually but unavoidably, into 'Spider-Human no more.' They'd stopped short of throwing their costume in the trash can, but their mind was pretty much made up.

Kris still hadn't figured out how to explain the full extent of their decision to Noelle. She was still in that early stage of super-heroing, wrapped up in that thrill that Kris remembered well: That feeling of joy and exhilaration that comes with having power and freedom like nothing you'd ever dreamed of, before it starts to feel more like a burden than a gift. They hoped that that enthusiasm lasted for her. They thought that maybe it would; Noelle had always had more bright-eyed optimism than they did.

Kris hadn't felt that way since the fight with their father. Asgore Dreemurr, the Kingpin of Crime. The man who had adopted them, raised them, and eventually, tried to kill them. Because they were a human. Because they were a disappointment. Because they were standing in the way of his power-hungry ambition. Turns out, the whole time while he had been teaching a young Kris the difference between right and wrong, he hadn't been practicing what he preached. And once they found out his secrets and tried to stop him? Well, Asgore had already killed one person he loved - Rudy, Noelle's father - to protect his secrets. Whatever love he might have felt for his adopted child hadn't been enough to stay his hand.

Kris and their brother, Noelle and her sister, and even Berdly had all joined forces to oppose Asgore, but only Kris had been there when the Kingpin had come close to killing them. Only Kris had seen the look in his eyes, that haunting, grim determination. If Asriel hadn't arrived when he did and interrupted him, their dad would have done it. Nothing Kris could have said would have stopped him.

And yet part of them wondered, every day. What if they had never become Spider-Human? What if they hadn't tried to play the hero? Would their father have still loved them? Did he *ever* really love them?

Asgore was in prison now, held without bail while awaiting trial, but Kris hadn't worked up the courage to go and visit him, to go sit with a phone held to their ear and look at their father through a pane of glass and see the disgust and hate in his eyes as they begged to know if any of it was ever real. Maybe one day they'd be strong enough. But not yet. Not when they were still learning how to be just Kris - not a symbol, not a hero, but just a human.

Kris swung faster, ignoring the cold and the knot of anxiety in their stomach. They were getting close to Gastcorp now. They needed to make sure Noelle was okay. That was all that mattered. They worried about her so much these days; they may not have been able to bring themself to put on their costume and swing through the city by her side anymore, but that didn't mean they didn't care. Kris knew they had to let their girlfriend be free, but if they could have, they would have wrapped her in webbing and kept her safe by their side at all times. She was the only person they could still trust, the only one who understood what it was like to be them - and she put herself in danger every day. That part of the job had never bothered Kris that much, when it was only them risking their life. But with Noelle…

There it was ahead - the Gastcorp building, tall and sleek and totally dark. Not a light to be seen in any window, an imposing pillar of shadow standing out in stark contrast to the array of lights from the cityscape around it, like an entire skyscraper had been blacked out of an otherwise postcard-perfect scene. The moment they'd turned on the television in Noelle's room and seen that ominous absence of light, they'd known something was deeply wrong. It had an eerie look to it somehow, and Kris instinctively knew there was more at play here than a mere power outage. They wondered if Noelle had felt it too, that sense of dread and unease, or if it was just their anxiety getting the better of them. If she'd felt afraid, it hadn't stopped her from going inside. Noelle had always been brave like that.

Only now she hadn't come back out, and Kris had to believe that didn't mean anything, that she was okay. They couldn't be the brave one, not alone. Not without her.

The cops were still outside the entrance, still maintaining a perimeter to hold back the crowd, the lights on their cars flashing red and blue against the buildings around them. They looked restless, even bored - they'd been there a while and not much had happened, and that charged air of anticipation was clearly starting to dissipate into twitchy impatience. Maybe that was why several nearby officers spun around and whipped their guns out when they heard Kris land in a crouch behind them.

Kris straightened up, staring down the gun barrels at the startled cops, body tensed and ready to move. For a moment, that feeling of breathless danger and coiled power hit them like a familiar drug, a flash of euphoric invincibility. But only for a moment. Then their hand began to shake, and their heart beat faster in

their chest. The world started to tighten around them, and their ears began to fill with the thump-thump of their own panicked pulse.

Undyne's rough voice cut through the fog, drawing their attention back from the brink. "Stand down, you idiots! Put those guns down! It's only the other spider kid." A tall, blurry blue shape was standing over them. Kris tried to force their eyes to focus. "Hey kid, you alright? You don't look too hot."

Kris brushed their windswept hair down over one eye. "I'm fine."

"You're out of uniform," Undyne noted. She didn't look surprised to see them, but their civilian attire had earned Kris a raised eyebrow.

"I was in a hurry."

"You came for her, didn't you?" Undyne glanced over her shoulder at the building's entrance, where an almost liquid-like black fog swirled just behind the glass doors. It looked even more uncanny in person than it had on TV. "You want to go after Noelle."

Kris took a deep breath, pulling themself together. Trying to feel brave and not just scared. "Someone has to."

"She didn't say how long it might take to do…whatever it is she's doing in there."

"It's been over an hour," Kris said bluntly.

Undyne looked troubled. "It has."

"Why haven't you gone in after her? Why haven't you helped?"

Undyne raised her open hands defensively. "We *did* send people in there. Before Noelle arrived. They didn't come back. Spider-Doe was supposed to be the rescue team."

"And *you're* supposed to protect people. That includes her. Maybe this city wouldn't need superheroes if you would just do your job."

Undyne's expression hardened. "I am, kid." She jabbed her thumb over her shoulder at the police perimeter. "Right now my job is to keep those civilians back there out of harm's way and keep whatever's going on here contained. I let Noelle through because she insisted she could help. If anything happens to her in there, I'll take full responsibility, but I'm not going to risk even more of my monsters playing endless rounds of search and rescue when we don't even know what we're up against."

Kris narrowed their eyes and held their tongue. So the cops were useless, so what? Not like they really expected any better. "Then I guess I'm doing this myself."

They took a step forward, but Undyne caught their arm as they tried to push past her. "Kris, wait. I've already let one teenager walk into potential danger today. I

can't let you risk your life too."

Kris glared at her with their one visible eye, their superstrong muscles tense beneath their sweater. "I wasn't aware you could *let* me do anything."

"Kris, don't -"

"Take your hand off my arm, Undyne."

Undyne locked eyes with them for a few long seconds, then let go of them. But it didn't escape Kris how her other hand had drifted to her holstered sidearm.

"I could arrest you for interfering with police activity if I had to," Undyne said under her breath.

"No," Kris said flatly, "you couldn't."

As they stared down Undyne, they saw her eyes flick away from theirs and her expression change as she looked past them. Undyne took a step back, pointed at the building and said, "Something's happening. Look."

Kris turned just in time to see the darkness behind the skyscraper's many tall panes of glass fade, a patchwork of yellow windows popping into view as the tower lit up all at once like a Christmas tree.

The darkness had disappeared from the entrance, too. Kris rushed to the front door and pulled it open. Beyond was the lobby, all high ceilings and modern curved architecture, the Gastcorp logo emblazoned in huge letters on the wall behind the reception desk. At first, everything looked abandoned - untouched and yet devoid of any signs of life, the building's usual hustle and bustle replaced with an eerie emptiness.

But then, across the room at the head of a long trail of people staggering out of the doors and through the inactive security checkpoint, Kris saw her.

Noelle looked tired, but unharmed. She'd taken her mask off, holding it loosely in one gloveless hand and walking with her head down. Doctor Gaster himself walked beside her, which instantly set off protective alarm bells in Kris's head - but not their spider-sense, which they took to mean that Gaster wasn't a threat, at least not today. Behind him was a long line of scientists and workers and even a few dazed-looking policemonsters following Noelle and Gaster out of the dark, all of them appearing shaken by whatever had transpired. Gaster was leading them into the lobby, taking a moment to check that each one was okay, like a shepherd tending to his flock.

Berdly was there too, but for once he was hanging back from Noelle instead of sticking to her like glue, so he wasn't the one Kris rushed over to meet first. "Noelle!"

She hadn't seen them yet, still looking down at her hooves with an exhausted look on her face. Before she could register the sound of her name and look up, Kris was pulling her into a tight hug. "Thank the Angel you're okay!" Noelle

stood stiffly in their arms, not returning the embrace, so they pulled back to look at her. “You… *are* okay, aren’t you?”

“Kris…” Noelle said, her voice barely more than a whisper. She finally looked up at them, and for a second, her eyes looked strangely dark, her pupils wide. But she must have just been adjusting to the light, because then she blinked and her eyes instantly cleared and returned to normal. “I’m fine.”

“Ah, Spider-Human,” Gaster said, sidling up smoothly to the pair of them. For a skeleton monster, he almost seemed to glide around like a ghost sometimes. “Nice of you to join us, but it seems you’re a day late and a costume short.”

Kris gritted their teeth. Why did everyone keep remarking on their lack of a costume? It wasn’t like they needed one anymore, now that they didn’t have a secret identity. “Gaster. What the hell did you do this time?”

Gaster steepled his fingers, unperturbed as always. “A project of mine had some…unexpected results. Fortunately, your young friend here stopped by to help me put things back in order.”

“You’re lucky she did,” Kris retorted. “Next time you’re in trouble, maybe you’ll be on your own.”

“It’s okay, Kris,” Noelle said. Her voice sounded flat and tired. “I took care of it. It wasn’t Gaster’s fault.”

Kris shot her a puzzled look. “It wasn’t?”

“Well…” Noelle glanced at Gaster, her expression hesitant. “It doesn’t matter. It won’t happen again. Will it, Doctor?”

Gaster said nothing, but bowed his head in a respectful nod. On any other man, the gesture might have looked almost sheepish.

“See?” Noelle said. “We have an understanding.”

“An under-” Kris spluttered. “Noelle, *what happened* in there?”

“Like I said, I dealt with the problem. You don’t have to worry about it. That’s what you want, isn’t it, Kris? To not have to worry about this stuff anymore?”

“I…I still worry, Noelle.”

“Well there’s no need to,” Noelle said coldly. “Thanks for coming after me, Kris, but I have it under control. You don’t have to trouble yourself.” She pushed past them, heading for the exit.

Kris followed her out the door and onto the street outside. Undyne saw them and stepped forward, no doubt full of questions, but Kris held out their hand and gestured for her to wait. “Noelle, all I want is to make sure you’re okay. Are you?”

“I said I’m *fine,”* Noelle snapped. But her sudden anger deflated just as quickly as it came, and she ducked her head, hugging her arms to her chest. “I’m just… it’s been a long day. I just want to go home and take a hot shower and sleep for the rest of the night.”

“Do you want me to come with you? I could spend the night…”

“No,” Noelle said sharply. “No, thank you, Kris, but you should go home. I want to be…alone right now. I’ll see you at school.”

Without another word, without even stopping to talk to the cops, she pulled on her mask and swung off into the night.

“What was that about?” Undyne demanded, marching up to Kris. “Did she say what happened?”

“Why don’t you go inside and ask Gaster?” Kris said, their temper fraying. “It’s his company. Noelle’s just the one cleaning up his mess.”

“Not like her to leave without giving a report,” Undyne muttered, but she headed inside without pushing the point, flanked by a group of officers.

Kris remained outside, looking up at the city. Snowflakes had started falling again, catching the flashes of blue and red light from the police cruisers, like a lightshow in the sky. They couldn’t stop hearing Noelle’s voice in their head. She had sounded so strange, so detached. Maybe she was just exhausted. Maybe they both were.

After a while, Berdly came up behind them and cleared his throat. “I wasn’t expecting you to still be here, Spider-Human. I hope you weren’t waiting for me.”

Kris hadn’t been. They didn’t want to admit it, but they’d been so wrapped up in thoughts of Noelle that they’d forgotten all about Berdly. “I told you not to call me Spider-Human anymore.”

“Right…well, regardless, Chief Undyne had a lot of questions for me. I told her everything I know, but…Noelle’s the one she should have spoken to, I think. Maybe you should go be with her, Kris. I’m not sure she should be alone right now.”

“She told me to go home,” Kris said bitterly. “I can’t exactly follow her around if she doesn’t want my company.”

“Ah…then perhaps we should endeavor to keep a close eye on her at school. Make sure she’s alright after…whatever that was.”

“I don’t understand, Berdly,” Kris huffed. “What’s gotten into her? What even happened in there?”

“I’m…I’m not sure I understand it all myself,” Berdly admitted. And that, more than anything, unnerved Kris. Admissions of ignorance didn’t often pass Berdly’s lips.

“Come on,” Kris said, turning their back to Berdly so he could wrap his arms around their shoulders. “I’ll swing you home. And on the way, you can tell me everything.”

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By the time Noelle made it home, she was dead tired. Her legs felt wobbly and her head fuzzy. The evening’s ordeal had taken more out of her than she’d realized.

That didn’t stop her mother from intercepting her at the front door as soon as she entered. Though the hour was late, Carol hadn’t changed out of her work clothes yet. That made two of them, Noelle thought as she pulled off her mask and braced herself for the inevitable questions.

“Noelle! Thank goodness you’re alright. I’ve been coordinating with Undyne about the incident at Gastcorp all evening. She said you swung off without even giving a statement. What happened in there?”

“What happened?” Noelle said dully. She slumped against the wall, between two framed portraits of herself and Dess as children. Wasn’t that the question on everyone’s lips right now? And she didn’t have a good answer for them. How to describe that parallel world of untamed darkness? How to explain how she and Gaster had made it go away? She barely understood it herself.

She remembered…a sensation of merging. Expanded consciousness. Commanding the shadow like it was an extension of her limbs, mentally brushing up against something that was not her mind. But the details were fading now that she was out of the dark, like mist evaporating in the sun.

A moment of panic welled up inside her, constricting her chest. What…what had happened to her in there? Something had *changed* inside her. Why couldn’t she remember?

But just as quickly, the feeling extinguished, a numb calm settling over her in its place. Whatever had happened, it had needed to be done, and now it was over. She was safe. There was nothing to worry about anymore.

“Gaster almost caused a disaster again,” she settled on saying. “I helped him fix it. It won’t be a problem anymore.”

Carol’s eyes narrowed angrily. “That man,” she huffed. “I swear, this is the last straw. I’ll have his company shut down for this. I’ll get the federal authorities involved if I have to. Demand a full investigation to determine whether Gastcorp is a threat to public safety. There has to be accountability!”

Noelle shrugged. She doubted anything could stand in the way of Gastcorp and its army of corporate lawyers for long, but it wasn’t her problem now.

“But nevermind that,” Carol said, finally looking at Noelle closely enough to see the exhaustion in her posture. “Are you sure you’re okay? Were you hurt?”

“I’m okay, mom,” Noelle said, forcing herself to push up off the wall and stand up straight. Her stomach growled, giving her a convenient excuse to walk away and head for the kitchen. She was just now realizing that she hadn’t eaten dinner, and she was *ravenous.* “I just need food and sleep. Can we talk about this in the morning please?”

“Well, if you’re certain.” Carol was already drifting back in the direction of her home office. “I’ll need to hear everything you know about it soon, Noelle. But in the meantime, I have some more phone calls I have to make.”

Noelle left her to it and made a beeline for the fridge. She didn’t have the energy for much food prep, so she just grabbed the first container of leftovers she found. Something pre-made that she could dump onto a plate and put in the microwave for a couple minutes.

She almost fell asleep at the table waiting for her food to finish warming up. Only the sharp, incessant beeping of the microwave pulled her out of the fog. She stood up to get her food, mumbling a groan of complaint. She was so, so tired. No, worse than that - she felt drained. Like dispelling that darkness had taken everything in her. It was a miracle she’d managed to swing home at all.

Noelle scarfed down her food quickly, not bothering with proper table manners since no one was around to see her eating like a pig monster. It did less than she’d expected to relieve her hunger, but she was too tired to scrounge up anything else, so she just deposited her dirty plate in the sink and headed wearily upstairs. Her hooves felt like they were made of lead, weighing down her steps. She had planned to take a shower before bed - she still felt dirty from her contact with that oily darkness, half-expecting it to have stained her fur black, though a quick glance at the hallway mirror confirmed that that was not the case - but the idea of standing up that long felt impossible to her. She needed her bed.

Dess’s music was thudding away from behind her bedroom door like usual. She must not have heard Noelle come home. Noelle briefly considered knocking on the door, just to let her sister know she was here and okay, in case Dess had been worried. But then Dess would have wanted to know what happened, and Noelle didn’t have the energy for another conversation. She was fading fast.

On her way to her room though, Dess’s door opened and her sister stepped out, right in Noelle’s path. “Oh! Hey, Noelle! I saw you trending online earlier, something about Gastcorp? When did you get home?”

Noelle leaned against the wall with a sigh, feeling dead on her hooves. “Just now.”

Dess flicked on the lightswitch at the end of the hall and examined Noelle more closely as she blinked against the sudden light. “You okay? You look kinda… er…um let’s just say you look tired.”

*"So* tired," Noelle admitted. She hadn't wanted to bother Dess with her problems, but since her sister was here…

"Hey, can I…" She held her arms out. "Can I have a hug?"

Dess blinked for just a second and then pulled her in close. "Yeah, yeah of course. Is something wrong?"

"No," Noelle sniffed, enjoying the tight, reassuring squeeze of Dess's arms around her and the comfortingly familiar scent of her sister's fur. "Just a long day at work."

"Maybe you just need to sleep it off, then," Dess suggested, gently petting the top of Noelle's head, soothing strokes of her fingers through golden hair. If Noelle wasn't careful she might fall asleep right there in her big sister's arms.

Instead she reluctantly broke the embrace and forced a smile. "Yeah, I should do that. Thanks, Dess."

"Hey, any time. Not like I'm going anywhere, right?" She gave an awkward laugh and wiggled her ankle with its electronic bracelet.

Noelle said goodnight and stumbled into her room, not even bothering to strip off her costume before flopping down on her comfortable, wonderful bed. The end of the bed was still cluttered with her textbooks and notepads; Kris hadn't bothered to tidy up her things before leaving, because of course they hadn't. They would have been in a hurry.

She didn't know why she had snapped at them that way outside Gastcorp. They had rushed to her aid despite their earlier insistence that she had it covered, which meant they must have been worried about her. That had been sweet of them. And wasn't that the kind of support she'd been wanting this whole time?

They could have come with her to begin with, though. They could have faced the dark together, fought Gaster together. She wouldn't have had to figure everything out herself. She might not have been so scared…

Noelle felt suddenly, unbearably *lonely.* Kris loved her, but they were unreliable. Dess was homebound, her mother busy all the time, her father…gone. Even Berdly had done a better job having her back tonight than her own partner. She was a hero, an icon, an idol, and yet she was alone - known to all, adored by many, but understood by few and supported by even fewer.

She remembered a moment, back during the fight against Kingpin, when he had thrown a grand piano at her and she had caught it. It was a moment she doubted she would ever forget - straining alone to hold all that weight up with her superpowered but slender arms, she had been certain that she was going to be crushed. Until, that is, Kris had appeared by her side, helping her lift that great weight, keeping her from collapsing under it.

She felt like that all the time now, except there was no one else helping her bear the burden. Just her and the weight on her shoulders, bearing down on her. All

she wanted was some support. Someone she could always count on, who would always be there to help her lift the weight of her responsibility.

A tear wetted the fur of her cheek. Noelle sniffled and burrowed under the blankets, rolling over onto her side. Dark thoughts enveloped her mind like black smoke as she let herself drift off into a deep, uneasy sleep.

Something shifted under her skin.

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**Night, that it assumed would last forever. Cold, but not like it was used to. Dark, but not-dark too. Bright dots of light in the sky, brighter than anything it had ever known. And one dot, larger than the others. Glowing. Blinding, brilliant light.**

**This world was overwhelming.**

**The host-body knew how to exist in this world. She could teach it. *Was* teaching it, even as she slept. It could feel her dreaming. So many feelings, concepts, images passing through their new bond like shadows on the wall of a cave. So much to learn, to absorb, to make sense of.**

**Language was slow in coming. It learned first in sensations, then feelings. It did not yet know the names for the lights in the sky and the pillars of patchwork lights that people-shaped shadows moved behind. The dark mounds arranged in squares and the lines that divided the squares and the fast objects that moved across the lines. All these things were new to it, and it had not the words for this strange new world.**

**Emotions came more quickly. Feelings from the host-mind's dreams. A longing. A sadness. Anger and frustration. A sense of purpose. Need. Duty. Responsibility.**

**What was the Noelle-Host for? What did the Noelle-Host do? She dreamt of swinging. Soaring through the thin clear sky, like it was doing now. Fighting. Saving. Protecting. Fighting. Fighting…evil? Bad things. The Noelle-Host fought bad things to stop them from hurting good things.**

**This was good. This was something it could understand. If not in words then in the kinds of instincts that even newborn creatures possessed. Instincts saying, "strive, survive, resist the things that want to harm you." It was good to fight against danger. Bad Things had to be stopped or they would hurt you. It wasn't enough to just exist. You had to fight to survive. Everything knew that.**

**(Even its kind had once had predators. The memories never left you. Even before you were born they were there, waiting for you to inherit them.)**

**It already knew its purpose: to serve the Noelle-Host. Why else would she have bonded with it? Why else would it have been brought here, out of the cold dark womb of early formation and into the bright world? The Noelle-Host was its everything: the mind it learned from, the body it moved, the purpose it served. It would help her fight the Bad Things.**

**Only, the Noelle-Host was sleeping. She grew tired, and had to stop moving until she could get up and fight evil again. But it did not have to wait for her. It did not have to sleep. It would retreat under her skin when she was using the body, to lurk and to learn, and when she lay still it would carry on her work for her. This felt right to it. Efficient. Together they would be able to fight so much more evil that way.**

**Besides, it liked moving the body. Movement felt good. It was already learning how to move like the Noelle-Host moved, using the devices on her arms to swing through the air. This part was easy to learn. Practice, familiarity, muscle memory…these things were right there at the surface of the host-mind. It did not have to dig deep, just let impulse guide it. And if it wobbled, or was clumsy, it did not worry. With time, it would get better at being like its host.**

**It had even made a new form. One that looked like the second skin the host-body wore, only cast in colors to better fit in with this world of black night and white light.**

**It paused its swinging movement to perch on the edge of one of the many tower-things. Not the tallest one but still high above the ground-lines. It felt proud of how quickly it was learning about relative position in space. Geometry was confusing to it. This was its first time moving through a world with so many objects, so it thought it was doing pretty well. It had only fallen or smashed into the sides of things a few times, and it had done its best to cushion the Noelle-Host with its fluid form so her body would not get hurt. It did not feel pain directly but it understood that the host-body was more rigid and fragile and could be damaged. It could help with that. Already a part of it was learning its way around under her skin, mending torn flesh and reinforcing bruised muscles. It would not let her hurt. It would make her stronger.**

**She would be so happy when she learned that it was with her now. It had not figured out how to communicate yet, but it would learn as it bonded more deeply with her brain. It could not wait to be with her forever and always.**

**A sound reached its host-body's sensitive ears. Shrill sound, a single high and long note, extended until abruptly cutting off. It had never heard a sound like that before, like the voices it had heard from those around the Noelle-Host, only wrong. The sound had originated from a narrow dark space between two of the light-towers. It did not know if this was normal or not, but it had a tingle along the host-body's head that alerted her to the presence of Bad Things. It felt that sensation through her now and knew instinctively that a Bad Thing was nearby and had made that voice sound wrong. That was bad. Voices shouldn't sound like that.**

**And Bad Things were for fighting. This, it knew.**

**It swung down into the narrow dark to find the Bad Thing and hit and hit and hit until nothing bad remained.**

# Chapter 7: Poisoned Blood

Chapter Notes

CW in this one for child abuse (Susie's shitty home life again)

Alphys regarded the enormous house looming at the end of the long driveway and tried to work up the courage to go knock on the door.

The house was one of those modern mansions that was all sharp right edges and walls of glass. Stark white architecture that looked like someone had haphazardly carved a home out of marble slabs stacked on top of each other, the sides cut out and set with long windows. It had an almost skeletal look to it, if the skeleton in question had traded the sleek curves of interlocking bone for something jagged and unnatural. A fitting aesthetic for its inhabitant.

Alphys had been to Norman Gaster's home only once before, just before getting a job at Gastcorp. She'd been younger, fresh out of grad school and more ambitious, though no less anxious. She'd wanted to change the world.

Dinner with the CEO of Gastcorp himself had seemed a remarkable honor, though of course it was really just an interview. The company had also been a bit younger back then; still prestigious, still powerful, but not yet the monolith it had grown into. In those days, Gaster could afford to be a little more selective about his hires, taking the time to scout for talent and screen his would-be researchers personally. Alphys had been sweaty and stammering the whole evening, but Gaster had managed to see past that, to see potential in her and her scientific knowledge and her passion for monster biochemistry. She had ideas, grand ones, and if she talked a little too fast and too loudly when laying out her vision, he hadn't minded. Social skills were a secondary concern for a scientist, after all.

So she'd gotten the job. And for a time, everything had gone well. Until some years later, when her ambition had gotten ahead of her judgement and she very nearly created a nasty PR disaster for the company. A swift cover-up and a *very* strict NDA later, and she'd been out of a job. She had been lucky to even find work as a high school teacher after that.

But she couldn't think about that now. The Amalgamates Incident was long in the past. And Gastcorp had more recent and more public embarrassments to recover from.

*If he didn't want to hear what you have to say, you wouldn't be here right now,* Alphys tried to tell herself. You didn't just walk up to Norman Gaster's house and knock on the door - you made an appointment, got cleared by security and buzzed in at the gate. That didn't stop her nervous heartbeat from kicking into

overdrive as she approached the front door and knocked, a quick, anxious rap to match her pulse.

The door opened, and Gaster loomed over the short lizard monster, as tall and imposing as the day she'd met him. She'd half-expected him to wear a lab coat even at home, but he was dressed in an ashen turtleneck sweater and black suit jacket. The closest he got to casual wear; her own attire was more 'teacher formal,' purple pants with a green shirt and red tie, but she didn't think she'd even once seen Gaster wearing anything with that kind of color in it.

"Ah, Alphys. Come in, I've been expecting you."

She followed him inside, taking in her surroundings. His modern home was tastefully decorated - art on the walls, expensive furniture, everything impeccably clean - but it seemed…sterile, somehow. Like a showroom facsimile of status, engineered in a lab. Luxurious, but not lived in. It had the intended effect of being intimidating, but even her messy apartment felt more like a living space than this place. Or maybe she'd just been living in her income bracket for so long that anything greater seemed artificial. There'd been a time when she had dreamed of a life like this, but now she just felt more out of place in it than ever.

Gaster led her into the kitchen, a room almost the size of her entire apartment with a dining table bigger than her bed. He retrieved a pair of wine glasses and a bottle from a wine cabinet so tall that she wouldn't have been able to reach half of it on her own. "Can I offer you a glass of wine? The vintage is…" He chuckled. "Well, I doubt the details would mean much to you, so I'll let the quality speak for itself."

Not an easy offer to turn down, especially for someone used to drinking mainly cheap sake. "Th-thank you," Alphys stammered. "That would be n-nice."

Gaster poured them each a glass. "So. I will admit I was surprised to hear from you after all this time, and given the circumstances under which we parted ways."

That was a nice way of saying 'fired her so fast her head spun.' She tried to laugh it off awkwardly, like an old embarrassing story that they could all laugh about now, so many years later. "Aha…ah, yeah, funny, isn't it…" When Gaster merely handed her a wine glass with an impassive look on his face, she switched tactics. "I, um, w-wanted to apologize about all that, actually. I -"

Gaster waved his hand dismissively, silencing her. "Say nothing of it. You were young and hasty. Mistakes were made. Speaking as someone who has made mistakes of his own, and far more recently, I would be a hypocrite to hold it against you."

"Oh," Alphys squeaked. That had not been what she was expecting. After all the years of guilt and self-recrimination, all the nightmares, she had assumed she would have to fight an uphill battle just to be given the *possibility* of a second chance. It had taken every drop of courage she had in her just to come here tonight, and after all that anxiety, he was just going to…let it go?

She took a rather large sip of her wine, her mouth suddenly dry. It was good. Like, *really* good.

Alphys swallowed and tried to find her words. As usual, they didn't want to be found. "I'm, er, glad you don't…I m-mean, I thought…I'm sorry, I'm just a bit surprised."

Gaster smiled. "You must understand, I was sorry to let you go. The circumstances made it unavoidable, unfortunately, but your vision was…inspired, despite the flaws in the execution. You could have gone far at Gastcorp, had things been different."

"I…I think a lot about that," Alphys admitted. "What could have been d-different."

"Well," Gaster said, leaning back in his chair and gently swirling his wine glass in his hand, "I for one would always rather look to the future. So let's hear what brought you to my door."

"O-Okay!" Alphys said, her heart starting to speed up again. This was what she'd come here for, she reminded herself. To make a pitch. She could do this. "Are you familiar with the drug compound called MGH?"

"Mutant Growth Hormone?" Gaster said. "I've heard of it. A common street drug these days. Untested, unrefined. Dangerous."

"But fascinating!" Alphys blurted out. "Um, from a ch-chemical perspective, I mean… It's derived from Boss Monster DNA. And I always thought, if we understood more about the unique physiology of Boss Monsters, if we knew how to harness that…well, I was talking to Kris Dreemurr after giving a lecture on the subject, and they said something that got me thinking…"

Gaster held up a hand to stop her. "Kris Dreemurr. You mean Spider-Human, yes?"

"Yes. They're, um, my TA…"

"Noelle Holiday is in your class as well, is she not?"

"Yes, how did you… I mean, I'm g-getting to that…"

"Go on."

Alphys swallowed again and started over. "We were talking about w-why people would take an illegal drug that gives them Boss Monster strength, and Kris said if people wanted p-powers that bad, they should ask you for them…"

"We've studied Boss Monster physiology at Gastcorp," Gaster said. "Extensively. I recall you being involved in that research yourself."

"Y-Yes, but that was before MGH became a drug. Before you inadvertently gave two teenagers super-powers experimenting with Determination. Monsterkind has m-made so many breakthroughs. Back then, we were just hoping to enhance the

common m-monster physiology slightly, maybe lengthen lifespans by a few years."

"And now?"

Alphys steeled herself, and took something from her coat pocket: A small plastic bag containing a few blue capsules. She set it on the table between them. "Now we have this."

Gaster stared at the bag of drugs on his kitchen table for a long moment, and Alphys couldn't tell from the frown on his face if he was intrigued or affronted. As the seconds ticked unbearably away and Alphys shifted uncomfortably in her seat, she finally couldn't hold it in. "Aren't you, um, going to ask where I got it?"

Gaster snorted. "The usual channels, I assume. Right now I'm trying to figure out why you think your vices are any of my concern."

"V-Vices?" Alphys blinked, then blushed bright red. "I h-haven't *taken* any! I've just been a-analysing it! For science!"

"Of course," Gaster said with a thin smile. She got the distinct impression that he was messing with her. "And what conclusions have your…experiments led you to?"

"Th-that we have Determination this time. And I don't - I mean, I don't *have* any of that, but you have access to it and I only have high school chemistry lab equipment but I've b-been e-experimenting with the formula and…with the right modifications and the right ingredients…" She lowered her voice to a whisper, even though there was no one else around to hear. *"I think it could work this time."*

"Let me get this straight," Gaster said. "You want permission to use my company's resources - *my* resources - to manufacture illegal drugs?"

"N-No!" Alphys exclaimed, practically spitting in her haste to explain. "I want to give people superpowers!"

She immediately shriveled under the scrutiny of Gaster's gaze, scrunching her head down into her neck, sweating profusely. It sounded so stupid when she said it like that. A pointless, nerdy, juvenile fantasy. But the science had felt sound. She *knew* she was on to something. Something that could change the world. If only she could get Gaster to see it…

Gaster looked at her for a moment, boring holes in her with the black pits of his eyes. Then he abruptly pushed back his chair and stood up. "No."

Alphys's hopes withered. "N-No you won't do it…?"

"No, there's something else. Isn't there? I mean, really, Alphys, mixing Determination and Mutant Growth Hormone? That's your brilliant breakthrough? My scientists have *tried that already.* The results were…unstable. As I'm sure you could have guessed. You're smarter than that. So spit it out already. What's the missing ingredient?"

“I w-wasn’t sure if it was true,” she tried to explain. “But K-Kris told me…they said you have a b-blood sample. From someone…enhanced.”

Gaster regarded her. As always, he was calm and collected and confident, and everything she wasn’t. Only this time, there was something she hadn’t seen in his gaze for so long that she had almost forgotten what it felt like. He looked *interested.*

“Let’s say I do have such a thing,” Gaster said. “What do you propose?”

Alphys took a breath and tried to channel his impossible confidence. For once, her voice only shook a little bit. “I’d like to study it. Because if it works the way I think it does, and my c-calculations are correct…then I think I know *exactly* how to make the best use of that sample. And if I can s-speak frankly, Doctor, Gastcorp needs a win right now after r-recent events. You’re losing public sympathy, you’re bleeding money and talent, and there’s rumors you could have a government investigation breathing down your n-neck soon. You need something big. Something to make people forget about everything else. Something that *works.”*

“And you’re going to deliver that, are you?” Gaster said, folding his arms. He was still standing. Looking down at her. “What do you get out of it? Your old job back?”

“It’s n-not about the job…” Alphys said. How to explain this part? How could she possibly put it into words? “I just look at Kris and Noelle and I think - it shouldn’t have to be them. They’re h-heroes, but…they’re just children. They’re my *students.* It shouldn’t be kids who have to be the heroes. But if what they could do was something anyone could do? Then *anyone* could be a hero…”

“I see,” Gaster said. He paused, leaving her in suspense just a little longer, bracing herself as images of rejection flashed through her mind. “It would have to be kept quiet. Top-secret, under the table. And with *no room for mistakes.* But…” He smiled and extended his arm for a handshake. “I believe we may be able to help each other.”

Alphys blinked in surprise for a second, looking at his outstretched hand. And then she reached out to seize the second chance she’d spent years dreaming of.

****

Noelle was on the news again.

Susie watched the Monster News Network report on the TV with mild interest. Something about an incident at that big science corporation’s skyscraper downtown. She’d never been there, but she’d obviously seen the building, if only from a distance: Even among the numerous towers of the New Home City skyline, it stood out from the rest. Sounded like something had gone wrong there, and Spider-Doe had wasted no time coming to the “rescue.” Probably no one had

even needed her help and she was just grandstanding again. Even the Dreemurr freak had put in an appearance, so eager for attention that they didn't even bother wearing a mask anymore.

It was all stupid. Heroes were bullshit. If they *really* cared about helping people, they would be patrolling the sketchy parts of town, the neighborhoods of rundown old apartment buildings like the one Susie lived in, instead of saving corporate sellouts from their own mistakes. The city - *her* city, the one of the neglected and forgotten - deserved a better kind of protector than a spoiled rich girl who worked with the cops.

A creak sounded from the stairs outside the apartment door, the sort of sound that would go unnoticed by anyone who hadn't trained their ears to be alert for early warning signs. To Susie, it stood out like a siren blaring.

She quickly changed the channel to some boring competitive cooking show on MTT and gathered up her textbooks and homework assignments from where she'd dumped them on the frayed and stained sofa. She could at least pretend to be doing her homework. In reality she'd gotten distracted watching TV and hadn't touched it yet, but who cared? She could shake down that nerdy bluebird at school tomorrow, get him to give her his quiz notes. Susie knew for a fact that he made duplicates of everything just so she couldn't steal the only copy.

There was a scratching sound like keys fumbling against the lock. Susie held her breath and counted the seconds. A full 12 seconds passed before her father finally managed to put the key in the keyhole. He must have been even more drunk than he usually was when he came home this late. Usually it only took him 6-8 seconds.

The door swung open and her father stumbled inside, carrying a pack of beer in his left hand and a grocery bag in the other, a frozen pizza box under his arm. He shoved the key awkwardly back in the pocket of his baggy jeans and tossed the box onto the coffee table in front of Susie. "Dinner's served," he said, his voice slurred. "Don't say I never did nothing for ya."

Susie leaned over and tentatively sniffed the pizza box. She screwed up her face at the scent. "Is it the kind with mushrooms again?"

"That any way to say thank you?" her dad grumbled. "You don't like it, you can cook for yourself."

"Thought you didn't want me burning down the kitchen."

Her father shrugged, squinting at the TV - it was an old one, a boxy CRT years out of date and probably not far away from dying of natural causes. The kind of TV that deserved to live out its twilight years in a retirement home somewhere, not this shitty apartment. "That what you're watchin' this crap for?" he asked. "Finally learn how to cook like a woman should?"

"Nah," Susie said. "These people are like, professionals. With ingredients and everything. We don't even have butter."

“%#$&,” her dad muttered. “Knew I forgot somethin’ at the store…” He set the groceries down on the kitchen counter across the room, not bothering to put everything away before he grabbed a beer and stalked back to the sofa. He made a sweeping motion with his hand, gesturing at Susie’s school supplies. “Move that crap outta the way so your old man can sit down, will ya?”

Nothing about his tone indicated an actual request, so Susie scrambled to comply before he got any more irritated. She put all her stuff on the dusty coffee table next to the pizza box while her dad sat down next to her, hard enough to make the couch squeak and sag. The springs on that thing had worn out a long time ago. Her dad cracked open his beer and it fizzed and overflowed, dripping foam on his hand while he swore. Susie tried to subtly scoot over a couple inches. It was always best to remain just out of reach.

On the TV, the cooking show’s host, a boxy robot wearing a chef’s hat and apron, was verbally abusing a contestant for using 2 1/2 cups of sugar in her cake recipe instead of 3. Susie thought that was pretty stupid. Any cake was better than no cake. She hadn’t had one of those in ages. Not since… she paused to count backwards on her fingers. It had been a lot of years since her last birthday when her mom was still around.

Her stomach rumbled. Cake, shmake - at least there was always cheap frozen pizza. She opened the box with her claws and took a slice, shoving the cold pizza into her mouth and biting off a chunk with her sharp teeth.

As she chewed crunchily she glanced over to see her dad staring at her with a look of disgust. “You ain’t gonna warm that crap up first?”

“Microwave’s been broken for almost a week, Dad,” Susie said through a mouthful of rock-hard pizza. “Remember?”

Her father racked his claws across his bald head in frustration. “$*!%, that’s right. Well why haven’t you fixed it yet?”

“Do I look like I know how to fix a microwave?”

“Ain’t your generation supposed to be good with technology?” he grumbled. “Or is that just all the other kids an’ not you?”

Susie snorted. “Microwaves aren’t technology. Technology is stuff like smartphones and computers.”

“Don’t be a smart-ass,” her dad growled, swiping the pizza box off the table and getting unsteadily to his feet. “You don’t know $#% about all that crap either.”

“I know more than you,” Susie muttered under her breath while he plodded over to the tiny kitchen to heat up a slice of pizza on a frying pan.

She knew she shouldn’t provoke him, but she had also learned through frequent and often painful experience how much she could get away with. When he was drunk like this, her dad was mean but less likely to get physical, and if he did try to hit her, she could just lock herself in her room until he stopped screaming and passed out on the couch. The trick was to not let herself be a target, to starve his

anger of oxygen until it burned itself out. It was when he was angry and sober enough to stand up straight that she had to really toe the line.

Part of her still wanted to go hide in her room, but ironically, it made him mad when she refused to spend time with him. Better to just share space and keep biting her tongue until he lost interest in her. He was still her dad, after all. Least she could do to be a good daughter was to watch TV with him and pretend like whatever words (or blows) had passed between them the day before had never happened. For Susie and her dad, every day could be a fresh start. They just usually all ended the same way.

She ate another slice, figuring she could get away with two before he started accusing her of hogging it. He always ended up with the lion's share anyways, and then Susie would claim whatever was left when he was done. That's how it always went; the fair way, to hear him tell it. He was the breadwinner, she was the dependent. She wasn't supposed to get too greedy.

Her dad stomped back over, pizza slices on a plate, wiping the grease off on his shirt. He'd lit a cigarette while he was in the kitchen, the smoke curling from the ember between his teeth like a dragon breathing fire, if said dragon was small and flabby and kinda pathetic. He sat back down, again making the sofa shriek in protest. "Change the channel, will ya? I wanna watch the game."

Susie shrugged. At this hour the game would be a rebroadcast and not a live one, but it was all the same to her. She didn't like sports anyways. Sports were for high school jocks and lazy old men too out of shape to play themselves anymore.

The one exception was wrestling. Pro wrestling was cool. Susie thought she could be a pretty good wrestler. She was strong, and intimidating, and had plenty of experience with getting her ass beat. Getting paid to fight on TV was probably the only career she had the skills for. Maybe she should just ditch school and her asshole dad and run away to join the…wrestling circus? Or whatever.

"You get your homework done yet?" her dad asked, gesturing with his beer can at her barely-touched papers.

"Almost," Susie said.

"Almost ain't good enough. I seen your grades, girl. They're #$*@ing embarrassing."

"What does it matter?" Susie huffed. "All I need to graduate is Cs."

"An' half the time you can't even get that." He took an angry swig of beer, belched, and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "It *matters.* You think I want my girl retaking classes while the rest of her grade graduates? You think I don't know how the other - *hic* - other parents talk about me? Laughing behind my back at my #$tard daughter?"

Susie scratched at the scales on the back of her arm, a familiar, well-worn patch. "They're just jerks, Dad, don't listen to them."

“That ain’t the point,” he said forcefully - or as forcefully as he could with the syllables mushing together. “You gotta do better, y’hear me? For yer mother.”

Susie stiffened. “What does Mom have to do with anything?”

“She woulda wanted you to do better. To not be a…a #$*@ing failure.”

“Bullshit,” Susie said, her voice a low rumble in her throat as her temper flared. Not a wise word to throw at him, but she got that temper from his genes, which made everything that came of it his fault. He was the one who had ruined her, not Mom. “If she wanted me to succeed then she wouldn’t have $*#$ing left.”

Her dad looked at her with cold eyes and a vicious, hateful smile. “Maybe she knew what you were. Ever think of that? Knew even back then you were poison, so she cut her losses and got out. She was always a smart woman. If I’d been smart too I woulda followed her. Gone after the one good thing I ever had. But no.”

He was slurring his words worse than ever now, shoving them past a leaden tongue like toxic pus oozing out of a lanced boil. “What’d I do, day she left me? Picked you up from school, like a sent…senda…sentimental fool. An’ where’d did it get me? #$*@ing nowhere.” He pointed his beer can at her like an accusing finger, liquid spilling unnoticed out of the top to join the many stains on the sofa. “I’m not the one put all that venom in your heart. *You* poisoned *my* life, you ungrateful little -”

Susie stood up fast, hands clenched into fists. “I don’t have to listen to this.”

“You’ll listen,” her dad snapped. He tried to struggle to his feet, but had to lean on the arm of the sofa to keep from falling down. “You sit your ass back down and *listen,* or I’ll -”

“You’ll what?” Susie mocked. “You can barely stand, old man. Gonna take a swing at me? Come on then!” She stepped around the coffee table, keeping the obstruction between them. “Hit me! You’ve done it enough times, what’s one more?”

Her heart was pounding, her body spoiling for a fight. But in her mind, she told herself she should stop. She’d made this same mistake before. She could take Wasted and Whiny, but Sober and Scary would pay her back later for any lumps she got in now.

So instead she headed for the coat rack by the door and grabbed her jacket. “Screw this, I’m leaving.”

But her dad had finally found his balance and rushed towards her in a stumbling charge, a roar of anger welling up in the back of his throat. Drunk or not, he was still bigger than her, and it hurt when his head slammed into her back, throwing her hard against the door and nearly driving the wind from her. “Don’t you walk away from me!” he roared.

Susie grunted and slammed her elbow down into his side, once, then again and again. Being drunk did give him one advantage: it made him harder to hurt. He

didn't seem to feel pain, even when she stopped elbowing him and started punching at his head instead.

It was hard to land a solid punch on someone behind her, so Susie pushed off against the wall and forced him to stumble backwards. They reached the coffee table and tripped over it, crashing backwards onto the old scratched wood and squishing what was left of their pizza. So much for a peaceful family dinner. At least he'd fed her before trying to kill her.

"You little shit!" her dad shouted, wrapping his arm around her neck in a clumsy chokehold. "Everything I done for you, and you jus' throw it back in my face! You need ta learn some goddamn respect!"

Trapped underneath her on the table, he used his heavier weight to roll her off him and send her crashing to the floor in front of the TV. Susie wondered numbly if the downstairs neighbors would think anything of the thud. It wasn't like anyone had ever intervened before. Folks around here knew better than to dirty their noses with other people's shit.

She didn't have time to think about that for very long. She barely had time to roll over before he was on top of her. Suddenly her dad's weight was on her chest, propping himself up with an elbow in her ribs, his other hand grabbing at her hair. Not even hitting her - maybe he was seeing double too much to throw a punch - but just clawing, pulling, blindly trying to hurt.

Susie wasn't so impaired. She screamed in his face, spitting and gnashing her teeth, and slammed a fist into his mouth. He scrambled to pin her hands down, but she reflexively jerked her leg and kneed him in the crotch, knocking the wind out of him. He wheezed and she threw him off her, scrambling to her feet and heading for the door.

"Susshan!" his mushy voice called after her, and she hesitated just long enough, one foot out the door, to look back and see the carnage. He was on one knee, pulling himself up with a hand on the coffee table, his other hand clutching his mouth. He was bleeding from where she'd hit him; she watched him spit a glob of blood onto the carpet. "If you go out that door," he panted, "don't bother coming back. You get yourself arrested again, I won't bail you out. You can rot for all I care."

"At least I won't have to rot here with you."

She slammed the door on her way out. Miserable old bastard. She didn't need him. She didn't need her home or her things. Didn't need anyone. She'd be better off alone.

Susie grunted and clutched her side as she slowly limped down the stairs. Old man had gotten a few good bruises in. She'd given more than she got, though. *Heh…really shoulda been a wrestler.*

She really couldn't go back, could she? She'd hit him. Hurt him. It had felt good in the moment, but now she was having regrets. Not because of guilt, but because the old man never let go of a grudge. He was even more spiteful than she was.

He'd probably kill her if he saw her again. She should have just kept her mouth shut and let him yap. Tell him, "Yeah dad, you're right, of course you're right," and let it all roll off her back. Stuff down her pride and just take it. Why couldn't she even do that right?

Susie didn't know where she was going, but she couldn't linger around here. Always the chance that some nosy person had overheard them and called the cops. She'd prefer not to get arrested right away. Maybe later. With any luck, he wasn't bluffing about not coming for her if she ended up in jail.

The church. She could go there. Even with the window broken it'd be warmer than sleeping outside. Hopefully she won't run into Spider-Doe there again…

Maybe she'd get lucky and find another bad guy on her way there. She may be useless to most people, but the least she could do is stop a mugging or something. Be a hero for just one person, just one time. Not like anyone else was going to help around here.

But deep down, she knew that wasn't her. She may not be a spoiled brat like Holiday, but she was something worse. Something poisonous, corrosive, like her dad had said. An ungrateful punk with venom in her veins.

Susie had had to be her own hero since she was a little kid, and she'd done a piss-poor job of protecting herself. How was someone like her supposed to protect anyone else?

# Chapter 8: Return of the Dark Deer

The night went on. The hour grew late. And as was typical for her these days, Dess Holiday did not sleep.

Mainly this was because her sleep schedule was already *&#@ed six ways to Sunday, and had been for a long time now. She wasn't sneaking out to spend her nights robbing jewelry stores or rubbing shoulders with criminals in seedy gambling dens anymore, but she was still something of a nocturnal animal these days.

Besides, she had video games to play. *Code of Honor* never slept; it was always daytime somewhere, which meant there was always a global matchmaking lobby to join, even if some of the other players on their mics were trash-talking each other in languages Dess didn't speak. That was fine, because Dess couldn't exactly shout obscenities back at this hour of the night anyways. Not at full volume anyways, lest a grumpy Noelle knock on her door to ask her to keep it down again, and she wasn't going to do that to her sister after the night Elly'd had with all that Gastcorp stuff.

Besides, even with her mic muted and the volume turned down low, she could still seek company by streaming the online matches to her Twitch channel or to the voice chat in her Discord server, 'December's Den of Desscord.' There were always people to hang out with on there, especially given the way her server's membership had multiplied in recent months. Turns out being in the national news had a way of boosting one's online profile, even if what you were famous for was flipping on your crime lord former boss in order to (hopefully) get out of facing jail time for being a cat burglar.

Many of her social media followers and Discord denizens were just the usual weirdos: true crime enthusiasts and simps who thought she was hot, that sort of thing. Plus there were probably one or two people from the police or the DA's office in there just to keep an eye on her and make sure she wasn't saying anything she wasn't supposed to about their case. Dess couldn't be certain; moderating the server herself was something to do, but it was also a lot of work, so she mostly just let in anyone who wanted to join and banned anyone who started getting rude or creepy.

She didn't really talk about the case or her criminal activities much anyways. There wasn't a lot to talk about that wasn't public knowledge by this point. She'd throw a few anecdotes out now and then to keep the curious fans sated, but she would rather talk about video games. And hoo boy, she'd had some heated debates about those. Dess still couldn't believe there were people who thought that *Darkner SOULs 2* was the worst of the series. The nerve of these philistines to come into her own digital house with that crap.

"Shit!" Dess exclaimed, poking her head out from cover and immediately getting sniped from across the map by, let's be honest, probably some snot-nosed 13-

year-old brat on the other side of the world. “Angel damn it! Go back to Minecrap where you belong, you little *&$%er!”

She let out her breath in a huff, frustrated. This stupid game sucked. They kept releasing new versions every year and they kept getting worse and she kept buying them anyways, like a sucker. And why she insisted on streaming her humiliation for the internet’s entertainment, she had no idea.

“I’m not at the top of my game right now,” she told the chat apologetically while she waited to respawn. “Got a lot on my mind. It’s been a crazy week. You all heard about how my house got attacked by a supervillain the other night, right? Like a genuine, bonafide costumed creep trying to kill me! Well, okay, mostly my sister, but that’s basically the same thing. Oh yeah, and for any new viewers, my sister is Spider-Doe, you may have heard of her?”

That was the other reason her online platforms were blowing up lately: her association with Noelle. She got even more questions asking about her little sister than about herself, which… okay, maybe it still irked her a bit, but she couldn’t deny the benefit a celebrity sibling had for her subscriber count.

“Anyways, the guy who broke into my house was this weirdo with a big-game hunter shtick named Raven. Which, by the way, what kind of raven monster is literally named Raven? That’s like if I called myself Deercember. I bet his real name is like Simon Ravenson or something. Geez, now I dunno which would be worse.

“Point is, yours truly jumped straight into the fray to help fend this maniac off. Had to! He was gonna hurt Noelle. But we showed him that he messed with the wrong family. My mom - you know my mom, the Mayor of NHC? - even fired a shotgun at him! That’s right, assholes, don’t come at the Holidays if you can’t take the heat!”

Dess was getting excited now, and she had to remind herself not to raise her voice. The last thing she wanted to do was wake Noelle up. “Only thing is, when Raven retreated, my brave, badass little sis went after him. And I couldn’t give chase because of, you know. The situation.” She leaned back in her gaming chair to put her hoof up on the desk, displaying her ankle monitor (along with a generous amount of brown-furred thigh to keep the simps paying attention).

“Sometimes it’s so frustrating being stuck at home waiting for the action to come to me. I should be out there kicking ass like my sister, helping protect her. Helping her protect all you guys in NHC. Sound off in the chat if you're a night owl from NHC like me. Anyways, I just wish I could do more, you get me? I know, I know, I got myself into this mess. Still sucks ass though.”

She refocused her attention on the game, though she kept one eye on the chat, occasionally throwing out a direct response or a clever joke to keep viewers engaged. She kept getting pings from Discord, too, but even with her dual monitors, she couldn’t really look at the server and keep herself from getting shot by snipers at the same time.

When the match was over though, she took a moment to check her DMs. The most recent one was from a user called ChaosRevolver, which sounded like it would be the name of a weapon in Darkner SOULs if those games had guns instead of swords. Dess didn't know this user personally, although she recognized the name: They'd been a member of her server for a few weeks but had mostly been a lurker instead of an active chat participant, and she'd never seen them in VC. Curious, she clicked on their icon, which depicted a cartoon clown face that looked like it had been drawn in MS Paint by a 5-year-old. An odd choice, but it took all sorts.

ChaosRevolver: SAW YOUR STREAM, STREAM. I HAVE AN OFFER FOR YOU, IT WOULD SEEM.

Okay, this guy typed *weird,* but hey, typing quirks were a thing some people had, especially in certain online fandoms. Didn't mean she wasn't going to make fun of it, though.

WinterCelebration69: WHY ARE WE YELLING? AND WHAT'S WITH THE ECHO, ECHO?

ChaosRevolver: YOU SEEM UNHAPPY AND ALONE, IN LEGAL TROUBLE, STUCK AT HOME. BUT WHAT IF I COULD TURN THAT FROWN, UPSIDE DOWN?

WinterCelebration69: I don't want to see your junk and I don't send pics or do any shit on cam, sorry.

ChaosRevolver: YOU MISTAKE ME, EE HEE HEE! I SERVE AT THE PLEASURE OF ANOTHER, AND THEY HAVE NO DESIRE FOR A DIGITAL LOVER! NOR DO THEY CARE ABOUT YOUR ONLINE GAMING KILLS, KILLS. THEY SEEK THE SERVICE OF YOUR OTHER SET OF SKILLS!

Okayyy, this was getting weird. Probably time to abort and hit that block button. But…maybe she should try and get some more information first.

WinterCelebration69: Who are you talking about? And why should I care?

ChaosRevolver: MY MASTER'S NAMES ARE MANY. THEY ARE A GENIUS IN THE FIELD OF TECHNOLOGY, WHO MAKES THEIR LIVING THROUGH ILLICIT ACTIVITY. IF IT IS GIZMOS AND GADGETS YOU DESIRE, THEY ARE WILLING TO SELL TO A DISCREET BUYER!

WinterCelebration69: That's…great, but I'm not in the market for any, uh, gadgets.

ChaosRevolver: AND YET YOU ARE CHAINED BY TECHNOLOGY. BUT WITH MY MASTER'S HELP, YOU COULD BE FREE!

WinterCelebration69: What? What do you mean? I don't get it.

ChaosRevolver: LOOK DOWN AND SEE, SEE!

Dess looked down at her hooves - and more specifically, at the ankle bracelet that she wore everywhere now, that would alert her parole officer if she set foot outside a given range roughly the size of her family's property. The LED panel on the side was lit up green, to show that it was active.

As she watched, the panel switched from green to red.

Dess stared at it, shocked and horrified. Red meant it was deactivated, and it wasn't supposed to *be* deactivated, ever. It would raise an alarm, someone would be sent to her house to investigate, and they would suspect her of tampering with it.

WinterCelebration69: What did you do?! Are you trying to get me thrown in jail??

ChaosRevolver: FRET NOT! THE SIGNAL HAS BEEN BLOCKED! NO ONE WILL KNOW IF YOU LEAVE WHILE IT'S OFF, OFF.

Dess looked down again at that little red light. Could it be true? She hardly dared to test it - if she left the house and this weirdo turned out to be lying to her, it would be a violation of her parole, and that was a 'one strike you're out' type of deal.

But if they were telling the truth…

How many times had she wished she could be free of that stupid surveillance device, if only for a little while? But now that she had the chance, it felt too good to be true. It made Dess nervous; a stranger doing her a favor would almost certainly come with strings attached.

WinterCelebration69: What's the catch?

ChaosRevolver: MY MASTER WISHES FOR THE TWO OF YOU TO MEET, AT A WAREHOUSE ON THE CORNER OF MASON AND SIXTY-THIRD STREET, TO DISCUSS CAREER OPPORTUNITIES, OF MUTUAL BENEFIT TO BOTH PARTIES.

WinterCelebration69: Okay, two things. One, this sounds an awful lot like a trap, and I'm not keen on being kidnapped so you can use me as bait for my sister or whatever. And two, I've already been burned once before by working for a criminal. What makes you think I'd put myself in that position again?

ChaosRevolver: DISLIKE WHAT YOU HEAR AND YOU'LL BE FREE TO GO - SPIDER-DOE NEED NEVER KNOW, KNOW! BUT NEITHER WILL YOU IF YOU DO NOT AGREE - YOU MIGHT MISS OUT ON A GOLDEN OPPORTUNITY!

Dess looked at the bracelet's red light again, then to her bedroom window, beyond which the dark shadows of night were beckoning her. It had been too long since she'd been out in those shadows, going where she wasn't supposed to, getting into scrapes and inviting trouble, moving through the world on her own terms. She wasn't a creature made to be confined.

Her confinement could get much worse, though. Dess didn't want to go to prison. In that regard, even contemplating this was foolish. Whoever was trying to bait her out into the night was practically daring her to break her parole. And even if they did turn out to be a friend rather than a foe, doing under the table business with criminals was exactly what had gotten her into this mess in the first place.

And yet…

She moved to the window, opened it to feel the cold night air blowing in against her fur. Somewhere out there was a man who had attacked her sister in the bedroom right next to hers, and she couldn't do anything about it from in here. And somewhere else out there was someone inviting her to break the rules and take back control of her life. No doubt they would ask something of her in return, but Dess wasn't afraid to say no to criminals. Even if she turned down this person's offer, she could at least get one night of freedom out of it. One more chance to feel the wind on her face as she ran across rooftops, out in the wide open city whose lights she could see gleaming through the night from her window like taunting, out-of-reach beacons calling her to adventure. It might be the last chance she would get in a long while.

But if this person could teach her how to fool her ankle bracelet whenever she wanted…

Besides, her mom kept telling her she should get more exercise.

Within minutes, Dess had bade her stream viewers goodnight, stripped out of her clothes, and pulled on the skin-tight black catsuit that she'd been keeping stashed away in a box in the back of her closet. It still fit her okay, even if she had put on a couple pounds - take that, Mom. She'd lost her old white wig and mask, but she could live without such disguises. She'd just have to not get caught. Fortunately, Dess had always been very good at not getting caught.

She paused just briefly before heading out the window, to send one last DM to her mysterious benefactor.

WinterCelebration69: I'm on my way.

****

The warehouse loomed up before her in the night, big and dark and still, like a sleeping giant. Dess hesitated, scanning the building for signs of life - or signs of a trap. It wasn't too late to back out, to turn around and go home before they realized she wasn't coming. She'd enjoyed running across the rooftops immensely, finally getting her blood flowing again and stretching out unused muscles, but maybe she should quit while she was ahead and avoid pushing her luck.

She entertained those thoughts for a moment before dismissing them. No one ever got ahead in life by playing it safe.

The warehouse was secured with a gate and a fence, but Dess didn't need spider-powers to shimmy up a streetlight outside and leap over the barbed wire tips. She landed in a roll on the concrete beyond, a satisfied smile sneaking across her face. *Still got it.*

As the Kingpin's right-hand thief, she'd tackled jobs much more challenging than this. What she'd learned from that experience is that she was really good at breaking into places she didn't belong. Dess had missed that illicit thrill of sneaking around in the shadows, showing off by trying to get in and out with as little trace of her presence left behind as possible. She was like a ghost, slipping past defenses and disabling security systems. It made her feel unstoppable.

So it was with confidence that she strolled up to the open mouth of the unlit warehouse. There were no locked doors on the massive building, only that darkened entranceway, inviting and intimidating at the same time. Dess took a step inside, then another, feeling the darkness press in around her.

"Hello?" she called, her voice low and husky. "Anybody there?" She was going to feel like such a clown if she'd gotten the wrong warehouse by mistake.

Why else would it be so #*@$ing dark in here, though? "Hey, anyone wanna get the li-"

Dess cut herself off as the overhead lights flickered on with an electric hum, revealing a vast room full of boxes and shipping containers. No sign of people, though. Either those lights were on a motion sensor, or someone was playing games with her.

Her hackles up, eyes open and ears alert, Dess scanned the room. It was so big, and so crowded. Plenty of places to hide.

This was starting to feel like a bad idea. "All right," she called, raising her voice this time, "if someone's in here, you've got about 5 seconds to show yourself!"

In the corner of her eye she caught a flash of movement between two boxes. Dess spun on her hoof, but she couldn't see anything now.

Then came a laugh, high-pitched and gleeful. The sound echoed around the high-ceilinged space, making its source impossible to pin down.

"#*$! this," Dess muttered to herself. She began walking slowly backwards towards the exit, her eyes darting from corner to corner in case someone popped out to start shooting at her.

Instead her gaze snagged on a glint of light as something long and metallic arced through the air with a whoosh, flying straight at her head. Dess yelped and ducked down, and the projectile flew overhead, spinning wildly, before curving back around like a boomerang.

She looked up just in time to see the weapon snatched out of the air by a diminutive figure standing dramatically on top of a stack of crates. Her jaw dropped and her fists clenched as she saw what had nearly taken her head off: a

long, curved scythe, with pointy teeth affixed to the steel blade, and a whimsically painted striped handle.

The figure holding the blade hopped down from the crates, bouncing off the ground with a cartoonish squeak. He was short and squat to the point of being almost circular, dressed like a jester in a little cloak and a double-pronged black and purple hat with bells on the end. His skin was a pale gray, his face round and his ears pointed. His teeth were sharp, his mouth curved into a perfect half-circle smile.

“What the hell?!” Dess called out. Every muscle in her body was tense, ready to move if this little freak came at her again, but she didn’t dare turn her back to flee. That scythe had moved so fast… “Who are you and why are you trying to kill me? Are you one of Kingpin’s men?”

“Kingpin?” the clown echoed, miming a look of affronted shock. “What an assumption! I am he with whom you spoke earlier. The enigmatic ChaosRevolver! But IRL, you may call me Jevil!” He swept himself into a bow, the bell-tipped ends of his hat jingling as they touched the ground.

Angel above. She *knew* this guy would turn out to be a weirdo, but this was too much. Dess had never met a clown monster before. Was that even a thing? Or was he just dressed like a court jester because every criminal in this city needed to have some kind of stupid gimmick? If that was the case, she honestly couldn’t even tell what kind of monster he was supposed to be under those goofy clothes.

“Great! Nice to meet you too!” she said sarcastically. “Do you always greet people by trying to decapitate them?”

“Eee hee hee! I merely wanted to see, see, if your reflexes were all they’re cracked up to be! A harmless test, before the rest! You were never in real danger - my blade could be a lot sharper!” As though to demonstrate, Jevil spun the scythe in his hand before putting the blade to his stubby neck and making a sawing motion back and forth, closing his eyes and sticking out his tongue macabrely. Then he smiled and stopped, sitting down and literally rocking back and forth with unhinged laughter.

“Okayyy,” Dess said, taking another cautious step back while Jevil was distracted. “This has been, um, interesting, but I was kinda hoping for more than just a crazy person throwing knives at me, so if it’s all the same to you, I’ll just be going now.”

“Wait, wait!” Jevil cried. “If you go, it will be too late! I may sometimes make a bad first impression.” He hung his head in exaggerated remorse. “It is with great humility that I make this confession. But do not turn your back on fate, fate, until you see what awaits!”

“Awaits where?” Dess challenged. “I don’t see anything in here but you.”

“Eeheehee!” Jevil bounced - literally bounced; he seemed to be almost weightless, like a balloon - in the direction of an unmarked red shipping

container standing in the center of the warehouse floor. “Follow me and you will see, see!”

He opened the door at the end of the container with a deafening screech of rusty hinges, pulling on it with a strength that didn’t seem to match his tiny figure. The container looked empty inside, but it was unlit and Dess couldn’t see the far end.

“Yeah, no,” she said, backing away and shaking her head. “You think I’m stupid or something? I’m not gonna just waltz on into your murder box. Probably just slam the door on me and trap me in there or some shit.”

“If you fear the worst,” Jevil grinned, “I will go first!”

He half-skipped, half-jumped into the shipping container, giggling as he went.

Dess glanced back over her shoulder, wondering if she could get out the door and back over the fence before this weird little clown came after her. This was insane. She wished she’d brought a weapon, even just a baseball bat or something.

And yet, the freak didn’t really seem that dangerous, just weird as hell. His own weapon was a blunt-edged toy, and while she supposed it was possible he was concealing another one, there weren’t a lot of places he could be hiding a knife or a gun. She was much bigger than he was, and she was a trained fighter. She could probably take him if she had to kick his ass.

Dess looked back to where Jevil was waiting for her inside the container, his eyes glowing in the dark like a cat’s. She chewed on her lip for a moment before walking towards him. *I ought to get my head examined for this.*

But she still stepped inside the shipping container, half-convinced that the door was going to slam shut and trap her in the darkness with Jevil. But that didn’t happen. Instead, as soon as she reached the far end, her fists clenched and ready to hit back if needed, Jevil pressed a hidden button on the wall. Lights came on above her, and the ground lurched under her feet.

“Hey!” Dess barked. “What did you -” She felt the floor begin to descend downwards, and cut herself off with a gasp of understanding. “This isn’t a shipping container. It’s a hidden elevator!”

“A precaution, to make sure we are not found,” Jevil explained with a heady giggle. “I told you my master works underground!”

“I didn't think you meant literally.” Dess glared down at him. “This better not be a waste of my time, or I’ll beat your ass faster than you can come up with a rhyme.”

Jevil began to float slowly upwards until he could look her in the eye, as though being hoisted into the air by the seat of his pants. It was more than a little disconcerting - maybe he really was a balloon monster in a costume or something. “You are a very angry girl, girl. Too much stress will make you ill!”

Dess rolled her eyes. “Well clearly I don’t make decisions based on what’s good for my health…”

The elevator ride didn't last that long. When the lift reached its destination, the doors didn't open onto a vast subterranean lair, but a low-ceilinged concrete corridor.

Jevil drifted out of the lift, half bouncing and half gliding down the hallway. Reluctantly, Dess followed. She didn't like this one bit, but if it was a trap, there was no avoiding it now.

She followed the jester through a door at the end of the hall and into a larger chamber beyond. While nowhere near as large as the warehouse above, it was somehow even more densely packed with objects. And not just boxes and unmarked crates, but actual *stuff* - piles of electronic scrap that sat incongruously alongside dusty display cases of necklaces and rings; bookcases of old leatherbound volumes with titles on the spines in languages Dess didn't recognize; shelves of crystals and vials filled with glowing liquids. There were even racks of weapons - futuristic-looking guns, but also swords and spears, some of them seemingly themed in odd ways, like Jevil's goofy clownish scythe.

The room was like a kleptomaniac collector's enormous unorganized storage locker: one part museum, one part workshop, and one part antique store. It was hard for Dess not to walk through the place with her head on a swivel, staring at everything she passed. She had no idea what half of it was or where it came from, let alone what any of it was worth, but this place was like a dream come true for a thief, given how much of this stuff was sitting around entirely unsecured.

As if reading her mind, a raspy voice called out, "Don't get any ideas, Ms. Holiday. If you pocket anything, I'll know."

Dess froze, looking around in search of the voice. It sounded like it came from the direction of a workbench in roughly the center of the maze of stuff. The table was covered with tools and pieces of scrap: It looked like someone had left it in the process of either assembling or taking apart a large futuristic rifle of some kind. But there was no one in sight.

"Who said that?" she called.

And then a figure hopped up onto a stool behind the table, holding a soldering iron. It was an elderly looking cat with matted purple fur, wearing a patched and tattered brown cloak with an orange tuft around the collar. The cat looked like they'd seen better days; their ears were bent and their coat patchy. Their face was scarred, and the curve of their mouth was ornamented with stitches, as though they'd suffered a recent wound. But most striking of all was their eyes. Their left eye socket was dark and sunken, so much so that Dess couldn't even see the glint of an eyeball inside. Their right eye was missing entirely, replaced not with a bandage or eyepatch but with a large orange button. It had the odd effect of making them look like someone's old, worn-down doll.

"Eh heh heh," the old cat chuckled. "Welcome, December."

Dess took a step towards the workbench, crossing her arms and staring them down. They were hardly an intimidating monster. Larger in stature than their

circus-freak servant, but that wasn't saying much. At least Jevil was energetic; the cat looked like a strong breeze might blow them over. "You're the one who invited me here?" She refused to use the word 'summoned.'

Jevil bounced over to stand on top of the workbench and gesture dramatically at the cat, his round body somehow seeming to puff up and inflate. "May I present to you, my master! The one known only as The Tinkerer!"

"The prerequisite mysterious moniker," the cat added, shooing Jevil off the table; the clown began to deflate and spin through the air wildly, making a noise like air being let out of a punctured tire and flying off into a corner somewhere. "My associates call me Seam. Pronounced 'Shawm.'"

"Uh-huh," Dess said skeptically. "What exactly do you do here, Tinkerer? And where'd you get all this…stuff?"

"Oh, here and there," Seam said with a smile. "I'm a collector of sorts, and as you can see, I've picked up quite a few odds and ends over the years. It is a hobby of mine."

"I think they make reality shows about people like you," Dess said. She'd spent more time than she wanted to admit watching trashy television the last couple months. "So, what, you just sit around hoarding all this stuff like a dragon monster with a bed of gold coins?"

"Oh ho ho, hah, hahhhh." Seam's laugh turned into a frail-sounding wheeze. "Not at all. I have no attachment to anything here. It is all just, as you say, stuff." They shrugged. "It's a way to pass the time."

Dess frowned. "If you don't care about your collection, then why did you warn me not to steal any of it?"

Seam's eye socket widened. "Because, December, many of these items can be… dangerous, in the wrong hands."

Her gaze flicked to the half-assembled rifle on the table. "And I suppose you think your hands are the right ones."

Seam let loose another peal of wheezy laughter. "I sell black market technology to criminals - and to self-described heroes, too. No, no, it is not my place to judge. I simply pair things with the people who need them most."

"And make a tidy profit doing it, I bet," Dess said. She was starting to see what all of this had to do with her and her skills as a cat burglar. This little weirdo was talent-scouting her. She wasn't sure if she should feel insulted or flattered that they wanted her help. Not like she was going to get a lot of other job offers while under indictment and (technically) confined to her house. "Let me guess - you want me to steal stuff for you. Just like Kingpin all over again."

"I would appreciate your assistance with procuring a rare item," Seam admitted. "I am…past the point where I can do all the work around here myself. In my condition, I require some help. Strictly freelance…but I can pay." Their smile widened. "With more than just money."

“What are you offering, exactly?” Dess raised a skeptical eyebrow. “Go on. Entice me.”

“I have many valuable items,” Seam said. “I’m sure there is something in my collection you want. Perhaps this, for example?” They held up a crystal, so clear and transparent that it was barely visible, like it had been cut out of the air itself.

“Is it worth something?”

Seam chuckled. “It’s called a Shadow Crystal. It serves as a sort of mirror. It can show you…other places.”

“So can my phone. Got anything with more flash? What about this?” She reached for something off the nearest shelf at random, a small spiky ring. But no sooner had she snatched it up then she felt a stab of pain in her fingers and dropped it on the table with a stifled yelp. “Shit! Sorry. Sharper than it looks.”

“That,” Seam said, carefully wrapping the ring in a grease-stained cloth and dropping it into the pocket of their cloak, “is something you don’t want to be touching. At least not with your bare hands, eheheh.”

“Look,” Dess said flatly, sucking a bead of blood from her thumb, “we both know I’m not going to be tempted with trinkets. The only thing I want that you can offer me is freedom.”

Freedom to sneak around at night, going where she was told, doing what she was told. Freedom to roam the city, but only on a leash. Which was still more than she had without them.

“Of all the treasures in my possession, freedom is the simplest and yet most valuable of all, hmm?”

“How did you hack my ankle bracelet?”

“I have many talents,” Seam said. “Many hobbies, picked up during my travels in distant lands. Expertise with computers is just one of them, and not the most complex. I can free you of your digital shackles whenever I like, completely undetected.”

“Which means you can also screw me over whenever you like, too.” Dess stalked over and put her hands on the table, leaning over them. “I’ve been blackmailed before, and I don’t like it. Why the hell would I agree to give you that much power over me?”

Seam stared at her. It was hard to read their expression when they had only buttons and darkened sockets for eyes. It almost made them look more like a puppet than a monster, and again Dess was given the impression of a well-worn but ultimately abandoned doll, like the stuffed animals Noelle used to sleep with when she was younger.

Finally they spoke, their relaxed voice dropping into an almost affronted growl. “Blackmail is not my style, December. If you wish to decline my offer, you may

leave the same way you came in. There will be no retaliation against you. On this you have my word."

"That doesn't seem wise," Dess challenged. "What if I told everyone about your little smuggling den? What if I sent the cops down here to bust up your operation?" *What if I kept my mouth shut and didn't give them a reason to hurt me?*

"You won't," Seam said. "That's not *your* style. I vet my potential hires, Ms. Holiday. I know you have little love for the police, and a willingness to circumvent the law. What I do here may not be strictly legal, but you are a criminal yourself."

Dess slammed an open palm against the table. "You want to bet on that? You said it yourself, you sell *weapons* to *supervillains.* Villains who my sister, Spider-Doe, ends up fighting. So maybe I should skip the cops and shut you down right here and now."

"I also helped Spider-Human upgrade their suit. Did you know that?"

Dess blinked. "Huh?"

"Oh yes," Seam said, smiling. "Young Dreemurr is a brave SOUL, but hardly a technological prodigy. But with my help, we were able to make them a costume that increased their crime-fighting capacity a hundredfold. You should have seen the hand-sewn scraps of cloth they were wearing before. Now they have a costume laced with bulletproof mesh, that is insulated against electricity and can keep them warm on winter nights. Much safer."

"Kris knows about you?"

Seam shrugged. "Everyone knows the Tinkerer's services are open to all who seek them. In this city's war of heroes and villains, I am merely a neutral party." They gestured at the latex catsuit Dess was wearing. "I'm sure I could whip up some upgrades for you or for your sister as well, if that is to be the price of doing business. But how about I do you one better? I can teach you how to spoof that bracelet keeping you caged. Do one job for me, and I'll give you the secret. After that, you may spend your nights of freedom however you see fit."

Dess turned away and hugged her chest, looking around the room and thinking hard. She didn't trust this "Tinkerer." And logically, she knew that getting involved with this would be a bad idea, that if she got caught committing crimes again it would blow up her plea deal and almost certainly land her in prison. The smart thing to do would be to tell Seam "thanks but no thanks" and go home and keep her head down.

And yet…

She couldn't shake the image of Raven flying away with her sister. The helplessness that had come over her in that moment, knowing that she wasn't even free to give chase. Noelle was out there risking her life every day to keep the city safe, and all Dess wanted was to be able to do the same for her sister. To

protect her family. She didn't know how to do that, but surely she'd have more opportunities to help with access to this place and its small arsenal of weird weaponry and valuable secrets than she would stuck at home in front of the TV. If she had to watch her sister on the news fighting supervillains one more time, powerless to protect her, she was going to snap.

But it was more than that, wasn't it? She hadn't wormed her way into the criminal underground all those months ago *only* to find her father's killer, and she hadn't worked for Asgore Dreemurr *only* because he was blackmailing her. Her mother would have called it "looking for trouble." But trouble wasn't a problem for Dess. It was something she was good at. Something she had mastered. Something that gave her life energy and purpose. Dess Holiday thrived when she was in trouble, and withered away when she was safe.

Lately she had felt like she was losing her edge, and slowly losing her mind. All pent-up and nowhere to go. So maybe a little trouble was exactly what she needed.

But…no. She shouldn't. She really, really shouldn't. Nothing good came of working for criminals; she knew that now. And there was more to think about than herself. If she landed her dumb butt in prison, it would devastate Noelle, not to mention create a whole new scandal for her mom. She was done being an embarrassment to her family, sick of feeling like the black sheep. The best thing she could do to help her sister was to make sure she could at least still be there for Noelle at home.

"This is a bad idea," Dess said out loud. Then she turned to Seam. "Sorry, but you'll have to find someone else to do your dirty work."

She braced herself, half-expecting them to pull a gun on her, or tell her that they had rigged her ankle bracelet to explode if she didn't do as they said. But instead they just shrugged, as if they'd expected that answer.

"Why don't you take some time to think about it?" Seam said. "Should you change your mind, you know how to contact my assistant."

"Wait, that's it?" Dess demanded.

Seam chuckled. "Were you expecting something else? I told you this isn't blackmail. I can't force you to do anything you don't want to do, December."

She narrowed her eyes suspiciously. "You're weirdly polite for a mysterious black-market arms dealer. It's kinda freaking me out."

"Used to dealing with a rougher class of criminal, are you?" Seam smiled. "I suppose I could threaten you, if you like. But why would I do that when I know you'll be walking back through that door soon enough?"

Dess crossed her arms. "Oh yeah? And what makes you think that's going to happen?"

Seam cocked their head, looking at her with that unnerving button eye. "Let's just say I'm an excellent judge of character."

“Obviously not or you wouldn’t have wasted your time with me,” Dess said, turning to go. “Thanks for the field trip, though. Always nice to get out of the house.”

“Be grateful, December,” Seam’s voice followed after her. “It’s no small thing, having a home to go back to.”

The words echoed in her ears as she rode the elevator back up. Crazy, creepy, cryptic old cat. Probably for the best she didn’t get into business with a kooky character like that.

Part of her was already doubting, though. Wondering if she’d made the right call, or just thrown away a golden opportunity, as Jevil had called it. But she’d already made her decision, and now she had to stick to it.

For once in her life, Dess was going to take a page from her sister’s book and be responsible.

# Chapter 9: Lightning and Ice

“I’m telling you, Kris, that isn’t me!”

Kris raised a skeptical eyebrow at Noelle from across the cafeteria table. Between them sat Kris’s phone, where a video of a Monster News Network report was playing. “Eyewitnesses say that the vigilante was wearing a black and white costume reminiscent of Spider-Doe’s,” the reporter said. “This figure has been seen only at night, intervening in several muggings and robberies this past weekend. The suspects in those crimes were found brutally beaten, and some have been hospitalized with severe injuries.” Overlaid with this narration were a couple of video clips: Blurry cell phone footage and a couple grainy old security camera shots washed out in green night vision. Nothing that gave a very good look, but together it all painted a disturbing picture.

“MNN has obtained footage showing the visual similarities to Spider-Doe, including the use of what appear to be webs. But given the violent nature of this mysterious crime-fighter’s methods,” the reporter concluded, “many are wondering: Does NHC have a new vigilante on its hands? Or has Spider-Doe finally gone to the dark side?”

This was the first Noelle had seen of the story, but apparently it had been on the news this morning and was already spreading like wildfire on social media. She’d spent the weekend mainly focused on resting and catching up on homework, even turning down offers from Kris to hang out because she’d been too tired. She hadn’t been sleeping well, waking up each morning exhausted. Sure, she’d still done a bit of superheroing in the evenings - stopped a couple car chases, put out a few tenement fires, the usual - but nothing like this.

And then Kris had sprung this video on her. Like they were actually entertaining the idea that she might have gone goth and started beating bad guys to a pulp for some reason.

“Joining us to discuss this important story,” the MNN anchor went on, “is Spamton S. Spameson, host of the hit investigative journalism podcast *Cut the Strings.* Mr. Spameson, thank you for joining us.”

“Ugh, turn it off please, Kris,” Noelle said, averting her eyes. “That guy gives me the creeps.”

“Look, I’m not saying I don’t believe you,” Kris said, pausing the video and stuffing their phone back into their pocket. “We just think there are some questions that -”

“WHERE WERE YOU ON SATURDAY NIGHT AT 11:24 PM?” Berdly shouted, drawing stares from nearby students by standing up and banging his palm on the table.

Kris pulled him back down by his tail feathers. “Berdly. Chill out.” They turned back to Noelle. “Like I said, we’re not accusing you of anything. But if this isn’t you, you need to get ahead of this. Put out a statement or something. You have to admit, whoever it is looks a lot like you.”

“No she doesn’t!” Noelle protested. “Look at her costume. It’s completely different.” It was a pretty cool costume - all black, except for a jagged white spider symbol on the front and back, the legs of the spider wrapping around the sides, and bold white eye symbols on the mask like hers and Kris’s - but way too edgy and monochromatic for her. As striking as it was, it almost looked a little frightening in that fuzzy camera footage.

“You sewed your costume yourself,” Berdly pointed out. “You could have made a second one just as easily.”

“Why would I need a second costume?”

“To distance yourself from these antiheroic actions, of course.” Berdly pointed an accusing finger at her. “It’s the only way you can cut loose and feed the rage inside you without tarnishing Spider-Doe’s friendly neighborhood reputation!”

“Berdly!” Noelle exclaimed, unsure whether to be shocked or exasperated. “I do *not* have a rage inside me. I might have to use violence to stop criminals sometimes, sure, but so does Kris! I don’t put people in the hospital. I’ve never gone that far.”

Except that one time with Chara. But that was different. That had been her father’s killer, who had been trying to kill the rest of her family at the time. If she thought too hard about it - which she tried not to do - Noelle could still feel the fury supercharging her cells, the feeling of her fists slamming into the human’s bloody face. She had lost control then, but she had still managed to stop herself, and she’d never seen red like that since. Certainly not with some random mugger.

“You do have to admit it’s pretty out of character for Noelle,” Kris said to Berdly.

*“Thank* you. At least Kris is on my side.”

“I’m only playing devil’s advocate here,” Berdly huffed. “You need to be prepared, Noelle. The press is going to ask questions about this new Dark Spider-Doe.”

“We’re not calling her that,” Kris said.

“It could be somebody impersonating me,” Noelle reasoned. “Trying to turn public opinion against me, maybe?”

“If that was it, why terrorize criminals instead of innocent people?” Berdly said. “Also why not replicate your costume exactly, instead of coming up with a different, way cooler version?” Noelle shot him an annoyed look and he added, “No offense, but it’s objectively better from a visual design perspective.”

“What’s wrong with the red and green? I like my costume!” Noelle rubbed at her eyes with her knuckles. Angel, she was too tired for this. “Look, this is obviously

just another copycat. There have been loads of those lately. Even Susie was trying to be a superhero, did I tell you about that?"

"That night at the church, right?" Kris said.

"Uh-huh. She had a little mask covering her eyes and like, a shirt with a purple "S" painted on it."

Kris leaned back in their chair and looked up, as if trying to picture it. "That's… wow, that's kind of sad, actually."

"Oh, don't be mean," Noelle chided. "She did, um, basically save my life. It was actually pretty heroic…"

"Well we can definitely rule out Susie here," Berdly chirped, interrupting Noelle's wandering imagination. "This Nega-Noelle is much too small to be Susie in disguise. Also she has antlers and hooves. You can see why everyone thinks it's you, Noelle."

"No, I don't! Do you think I'm the only deer girl in New Home City? That's racist, Berdly!" She pointed a finger at him with as much dramatic accusation as she could muster. "You're racially profiling!"

Kris snickered as Berdly spluttered and coughed out indignant objections. "Okay, okay…while we're stereotyping, I gotta say it, if only to rule out suspects."

"Say what, Kris?"

"Well, I mean," they said slowly, "we both know another 'Dark Deer' with a talent for hitting people. Do you think there's any chance -"

Noelle shook her head emphatically. "No. No way. That's impossible. Dess can't even leave the house, you know that! If she broke her parole she'd be thrown in jail for sure."

"Hmm," Kris hummed in acknowledgement. "Yeah, that would have been way too obvious anyways…" They shrugged and added, "Well, I'm all out of suspects. I guess we'll have to put a pin in this little mystery for now. Maybe Noelle can catch this newbie in the act one of these nights and give her a talking to."

"Maybe…" Noelle said. "It's a big city."

That would have been the responsible thing to do, no question. Track the copycat down and stop her from hurting anyone else. But part of her wasn't sure she wanted to encounter this violent mirror image of herself. Something about that white-eyed figure on the camera footage sent a shiver down her spine. Like looking in a mirror and finding your reflection didn't move the same way you did.

"In the meantime," Berdly said, "you should make a statement on MonsterTok to reassure the public that as their *official* superhero, you categorically disavow such despicable vigilante brutality! We can't let a few bad apples ruin everything

we've built! Don't worry, I've already taken the liberty of preparing a speech. I'll text it to you, Noelle."

"Um…thanks, Berdly. Oh look, there's Martlet!"

Berdly swiveled his head so fast Noelle thought his neck might snap. Martlet had joined the lunch line, getting her tray filled with mac and cheese. She glanced at their table and gave them a wave when she saw them looking at her.

"Oh god, oh god," Berdly whispered, shrinking down in his seat. "I still haven't decided how to ask her to the dance next month."

"What, the Sadie Hawkman's Valentine's Day Dance?" Kris frowned. "Berdly, that's still over a week away."

"But what if somebody asks her first?" Berdly said, wracking his talons down his face dramatically. "She'll probably have tons of suitors once everyone realizes how perfect she is! I have to get my foot in the door before someone else does!"

"Um, Berdly," Noelle started to say, "isn't the way it works with a Sadie Hawkman dance that the girls are supposed to -" She cut off as Kris jabbed her in the ribs with their elbow. "Ow! Kris, why?"

Kris leaned in and whispered, "Don't ruin this for me."

Noelle scowled at them, but then turned back to Berdly and pretended nothing had happened. "What I mean is, are you sure you want to ask her out?" Noelle said. "Haven't you known her for like, a week? I thought you two were just friends." She'd honestly been kind of proud of Berdly for making friends so easily. It would be a shame if he managed to screw it up with his…Berdlyness.

"Also I thought she was a lesbian," Kris said through a mouthful of food.

"What? Why would you think that?" Berdly sputtered. "You can't just assume someone's sexual orientation like that, Kris."

"She has a lesbian pride flag on her backpack, dude," Kris said. "Next to the trans one."

Berdly looked dumbfounded. "I…I thought that was the bisexual flag!"

"Berdly," Noelle laughed, "you've been friends with me for *how long* and you don't even know what the lesbian pride flag looks like? I thought you were an ally!"

"Shut up!" Berdly squawked. "I'm colorblind!"

Noelle blinked. "You are?"

"He's not," Kris deadpanned.

"Kris! Stop talking!"

“Hi, guys!” Martlet chirped from behind Berdly’s shoulder, making him jump. “What are we talking about?”

“Just talking about the dance coming up,” Kris said, a smirk dusting their lips. Berdly stared at them pointedly, his eyes wide and panicked.

Martlet didn’t seem to notice. She slid into the seat next to Berdly and set down her tray. “Ooo, the Valentine’s dance, right? That sounds so fun! I wish I had someone to go with…”

Noelle and Kris looked at Berdly. Berdly looked anywhere but at Martlet. Martlet looked at Kris and Noelle and her face lit up. “Oh my god, you two, though! Is this your first dance as a couple?? You’re gonna be the coolest dance partners ever! In the entire history of school dances!”

“We totally are,” Kris nodded. “We’re going to go wearing matching dresses spun from web fluid. Web-dresses are in this year.”

As was often the case, Noelle wasn’t sure if they were joking or not. “Um, really? I never thought of trying to make webbing clothes before. Can you do that?”

“Sure,” Kris said. With a wink, they added, “Well, you can. Mine dissolves after an hour and I think that would make for a pretty awkward dance.”

Noelle blushed furiously, her nose lighting up red. Now she was imagining it. From the look on Kris’s face that was exactly their intention. Damn them.

She decided to change the subject. “Um, speaking of, Kris… I feel bad I couldn’t hang out last weekend, and it’s been weeks since we went on a proper date. Are you free Wednesday night? I’ve been wanting to go ice skating at Monsterfeller Center all winter.”

“Ooo, yes!” Martlet squealed. “You should go, you should go! I’m too clumsy for ice skating but I’ve seen them do it at the Monster Olympics and it is! SO romantic! And you’d be so good at it!”

“I’m down,” Kris said. “I’ve never really, um, done it before, but hey, if I can master webslinging, how hard can some ice be?”

“Fahaha!” Noelle laughed. “Don’t worry, I’ll teach you. It’s definitely easier to get the hang of than webslinging.”

“Well okay then,” Kris said. “It’s a date. See you on the ice, Holiday. May the best super-skater win.”

“Um, Kris, you know it’s not the Monster Olympics, right? We don’t have to skate competitively…”

“Oh, I know.” They leaned in across the table, making intense eye contact, and whispered, “But I’m gonna win.”

Noelle leaned in to meet them halfway and give them a quick peck on the cheek. “You are such a dork.”

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The ice skating rink at Monsterfeller Center was one of Noelle’s favorite places in New Home City, even in February when the enormous Christmas tree that had towered over the rink a couple months ago had been removed. It may have looked less festive now that they were past the holidays and into the dead of winter, but between the snow on the streets, the always-stunning lights of the buildings looming over them, and the angelic golden statue of a tastefully nude monster presiding over the rink, it was still an enchanting, romantic destination.

Which made it the perfect place to take Kris for a date. She had meant to do so weeks ago, but she’d been so busy. Too busy to make much time for Kris, which she regretted. Tonight was a chance to turn that around and get some quality time with her partner.

Sure, the superhuman enby may not have had Noelle’s knack for ice skating - she had taken lessons on it when she was just a little fawn, and it was still second nature to her, like riding a bike - but enhanced strength and agility did wonders for one’s sense of balance, so they managed to keep up with her. Even being bundled up against the cold in a sweater and jeans didn’t make them any less graceful.

They looked like they were enjoying themself too, doing lazy figure-8 loops across the ice, the end of their green and yellow scarf trailing behind them in the air like a flag. The sight made Noelle smile as she glided along after them. It was nice to see Kris having fun again, after how moody they had been the past couple months.

“You picked this up so quickly!” Noelle shouted as she skated past them. It was honestly impressive. They had stumbled a bit at first, but that hadn’t lasted long.

“It’s all about balance and momentum!” Kris called back. “Turns out I’m good at those things!”

“Let’s test your skills! Spin me!” she called, weaving her way around the other skaters, what few there were - it was a big rink, set in a courtyard below ground level, and most of the crowd had moved aside to give the couple some space once they realized who they were sharing the ice with. Several onlookers had their phones out, and though it still made Noelle uncomfortable being filmed in public, she felt like she should at least put on a good show for them. The clips could make fun content to reshare on the Spider-Doe MonsterTok account Berdly kept pestering her to post to more often. Anything to take the focus off that violent copycat.

She really did wonder what all that was about. She hadn't wanted to show it in front of the others, but something about that black-and-white doppelganger unnerved her. It wasn't just the potential damage to her reputation she was worried about. If there was really someone out there with powers like hers, where had they come from?

Gaster still had that vial of her blood. She should have demanded it back in exchange for her help the other day. Though she had the feeling it wouldn't have been that easy. For all she knew, he had already used it for something…

But this wasn't the time to worry about such things. Kris had heard her shout and spun on their bladed heel to face her, kicking slightly against the ice to push themself into a backwards glide while they signaled for Noelle to come and meet them. She obliged, throwing herself forwards faster, rushing to catch up with Kris's retreating form.

"Come on, Noelle, keep up!" Kris teased, throwing a quick glance over their shoulder to make sure they weren't about to collide with any other skaters. They grinned at her, the backwards skating causing their messy brown hair to whip against their face in the wind as they sped towards the statue at the end of the rink. "Can't catch me!"

"I didn't think you would make me chase you!" Noelle shouted back, stamping down a twinge of annoyance at their games. Her fault for activating Kris's competitive streak.

Well, two could play at that. There was one surefire way to give herself a burst of speed. Like always, she was wearing her web-shooters over the sleeves of her winter sweater, the pressure pads tucked under the palms of her mittens. Noelle thrust her arms out, firing two lines of webbing onto the ice ahead of her, to either side of Kris. She saw their eyes widen as she grabbed the weblines and tugged, propelling herself directly towards them at high speed.

They hadn't practiced this maneuver before, and for a second Noelle was afraid she'd made a mistake, that Kris wouldn't catch her and she'd go careening off across the ice and probably fall flat on her face and embarrass herself.

But of course they caught her. They always did.

The force of Noelle's momentum sent Kris into a spin as soon as they grabbed her waist, but they were agile enough to adapt to it, hopping up onto the toe of one blade and twirling like an Olympic figure skater, their other leg outstretched gracefully behind them. They hoisted Noelle into the air by the waist, her weight no strain at all on their enhanced muscles, and she made sure to strike a photogenic pose as well, lifting her arms balletically and arching her back to let her golden hair fall down like a waterfall. She still kept that cropped above shoulder length these days to make wearing a mask easier, but she was too proud of her hair to ever cut it *all* off.

The crowd seemed to enjoy the display. Noelle heard applause from the onlookers, and in the brief glimpses she got of the crowd while spinning around and around, she saw even more phones pointed at them. As so often happened

now, ever since going public with their identities, they became the center of attention wherever they appeared, whether in costume or out of it.

Well, technically Noelle was wearing her costume under her sweater and leggings, but that was beside the point. She'd covered up despite her natural reindeer resistance to the cold specifically so that she wouldn't stand out in a crowd, but the costume was beginning to feel like a second skin to her, and she rarely left home without it on - unlike Kris, who seemed increasingly more comfortable without it. And that was fine, wasn't it? Kris deserved to feel normal sometimes.

Kris let the momentum twirl itself almost entirely out before lowering Noelle to her hooves and taking her hand, kicking off from the ice and leading them both into a gentler glide. They skated around the perimeter of the rink, holding hands and waving at their admirers watching from above or through the shop windows surrounding the rink on the lower level. The applause and cheers made Noelle feel special, like a celebrity star surrounded by adoring fans - which she supposed she kind of was. It was a weird feeling, one that she still hadn't gotten used to, but not entirely unpleasant. At any rate, it was enjoyable enough that she could smile and wave back at all the friendly faces.

Except, not all of them were that friendly. For a moment as she swooped past on the ice, Noelle glimpsed a man standing on the upper level overlooking the rink, wearing a bulky-looking coat and hat and a scarf and sunglasses that hid most of his face. Like everyone else up there, he was staring directly down at them, but unlike the rest of the crowd, something about him felt ominous. Did she know that guy? Her spider-sense began to prickle…and then Kris's hand in hers pulled her further on and away before she could get a better look, and when she got the chance to glance back at that spot, he was gone.

The fur on the back of Noelle's neck stood up nervously, and she had the feeling of being watched - but of course, there were many pairs of eyes watching her. And her spider-sense had died back down, so whoever that guy had been, he probably wasn't a threat to her. She was being paranoid. Most likely he was just a disgruntled Spamton S. Spameson listener who believed all the lies that weirdo said about her on his podcast. No matter how much she tried to help the city, she'd never have a 100% approval rating, not when some people found it more profitable to slander her and Kris. She'd learned that much from observing her mother's job.

Kris leaned down to whisper in her ear, "So much for a quiet, private date, huh?" They didn't sound upset about it, though - there was a playful smirk in their voice.

"I guess I should have known this would happen," Noelle sighed. She tried to force an easygoing smile, like it was no big deal and didn't bother her. "We probably don't have long until the paparazzi shows up. We can get out of here if you want. Make a dramatic exit, swing off into the night."

"We'd have to return our skates first," Kris pointed out. "Can't just steal them and run. That'd be a crime, and I'm pretty sure we're supposed to be the good guys."

“Okay, fine,” Noelle laughed, “we won’t steal the skates. But we should probably stop hogging the rink. Couple more laps, then take a break for hot chocolate?”

“Ooo, you just said the magic words.”

Noelle led them in another couple loops around the perimeter, giving everyone in the crowd a chance to get their photos and video clips in. Though she kept a cheery smile on her face, she was starting to feel tired. She hadn’t been sleeping well that week - or rather, she’d been sleeping a lot but it didn’t seem to make her any less exhausted. Maybe she should have proposed a less physically active date night, like going to the movies or something.

“I’ve been wanting to talk to you about something, actually,” Kris said as they skated shoulder-to-shoulder. “Maybe we can grab a seat somewhere quiet and talk over hot chocolate?”

“If our adoring public will allow us some privacy,” Noelle said, stretching a hand out to high-five a kid as they glided by. “What did you want to talk about?”

“It’s about…why I haven’t been doing Spider-Human stuff.”

Oh. *Oh.* She’d seen this conversation coming, and hoped she wouldn’t have to be the one to initiate it, but she still had no idea what she was going to say. A part of her already knew, of course, that if Kris hadn’t put the mask back on by now, they probably didn’t want to. And if that was the case, she would respect their decision. But it was hard not to feel a loss at the thought of forever being a solo superhero act. She’d spent so long hoping that one day, when Kris was ready, they could swing through the city as partners in crime-fighting again. She wanted more than anything to share that part of her life with Kris, rather than simply inheriting it from them.

They brought their skate session to a close, momentum slowing down until they could stop themselves by grabbing the fence around the perimeter of the rink by the base of the stairs leading up to ground level. “Kris…” Noelle swallowed. “I know I can’t force you to be a superhero. No one can if that’s not what you want. But you’ll always be my -”

Her spider-sense hit her like a brick to the back of the head, nerves blazing with a sudden, almost electric tingle. Kris must have felt it too, because they almost doubled over, clutching the railing as they wobbled on the blades of their skates.

Noelle looked up to see the man in the heavy coat from earlier standing in the center of the stairs, blocking their way. Sparks seemed to shoot out from his feet, creating little arcs of electricity that fled down the steps to either side of him. Noelle gasped as the man cast aside his coat and scarf, revealing the sparking, amorphous yellow-white body of an electricity elemental - a rare monster type, and a highly dangerous one.

“Oh no,” Kris breathed. “Electron.”

“I know him! You’ve fought him before!” She’d heard all about it, back when she was just another Spider-Human fan following their exploits on the news.

“Yeah, and I barely escaped with my life each time,” Kris said. “This is bad, Noelle. He’s one of my most -”

“SPIDER-HUMAN!” Electron bellowed. He had a strange voice, loud but crackling and distorted. His whole body seemed to jump and spark like a bundle of live current in a vaguely humanoid form. “It is I, Electron, your most dangerous foe! I hope you’re ready for the final battle of your short life!”

“Noelle, move!” Kris shouted, and pushed Noelle aside just as Electron reached out his hand and threw a blast of electricity like a lightning bolt at where they were standing. Noelle went sliding backwards on her skates, barely managing to keep her balance and avoid falling. Kris jumped aside clumsily on their own skate blades and fell onto the ice, sliding out of range just in time.

The lightning bolt impacted the ice with a thunderous crack. Thankfully ice was a poor conductor compared to water, and the electricity didn’t travel far enough to harm them, but Noelle could see the arcing lines of the current spreading under the translucent floor of ice, the force of them causing cracks to form across the surface.

Catching on to the danger, the crowd nearby began to panic, screaming and fleeing. Those upstairs ran away from the balcony, though a couple foolish ones stayed behind, cell phones in hand, documenting the dramatic scene. The handful of people trapped downstairs on and around the rink with them cowered in the corners, trying to stay as far out of the way as possible.

Great. First Raven at her house and now this. She should have known a supervillain would ruin her date night. Why should she and Kris be allowed to have a moment’s peace?

“Kris!” Noelle shouted, skating over to them and hoisting them to their feet with a super-strong yank on their arm. “How do we fight this guy?”

Kris wobbled on their skates; the blades were far harder to balance on when standing still. “First I need to get these stupid things off my feet!”

Another bolt of lighting slammed into the ice just beside them, and Noelle kicked off into a glide, giving Kris a shove. “No time for that! We have to keep moving!”

They skated swiftly, no longer doing lazy figure eights and fancy spins, but weaving in erratic zig-zags as lightning bolts shattered the ice all around them. Noelle glanced over her shoulder at Electron. He was *floating* down the stairs onto the rink, held aloft by bolts of current scorching the ground he passed over. His electricity tore up the ice beneath him with a horrible crunching sound, and he was laughing as he held his arms above his head, shooting thin bolts of lightning upwards and down like a rain of arrows.

Thankfully, he didn’t seem to be able to aim them very precisely. Instead he was blanketing the rink, hoping to get a lucky hit in. Noelle ducked her head and shot across the ice, moving as fast as her superpowered muscles would propel her, Kris following suit. Lightning rained down at random, landing on all sides of her

- and a few times directly in her path, making her yelp and twist her body in a quick turn to avoid it.

It was difficult to dodge when she couldn't see where the bolts would land. Every second she and Kris evaded them was a second they were getting extremely lucky. And every blast was damaging the ice, breaking up the smooth surface, and there was only so much rink to traverse. They couldn't keep this up for long.

Kris skated ahead of Noelle, and she looked up just in time to see a huge final bolt of electricity arcing through the air directly towards them. "Kris!"

There was no time for them to change course, so instead Noelle snagged them with a webline and pulled, arresting their momentum just enough to hold them back as the lightning struck the ground where they would have been, leaving a crater of broken and steaming ice. Unable to stop her own momentum, Noelle slammed into Kris and they both went down, rolling to a stop in the middle of the rink.

Noelle scrambled to pick herself up off the floor, her sticky fingers helping her keep from sliding on the ice. Electron was still hovering over them, and while he'd run out of juice for the rain of lightning, he now had his hands outstretched in front of him. Strands of electric current coursed between his palms, and Noelle watched as a ball of lightning began to form in the middle. She didn't want to find out what being hit by that would feel like.

"Come on," she said hastily, putting her arm around Kris's waist. "We won't get far boxed in and fighting with a handicap. We need to get off this ice and find some cover."

She raised her arm to shoot a webline at one of the buildings above and swing them both out of the rink. But before she could, her spider-sense flared up and she ducked as some arced through the air above her head and slammed point-first into the ice nearby: Not a lightning bolt, but a spear.

Noelle had just enough time to notice some kind of microphone strapped to the spear before a piercing, high-pitched wail emitted from it. The sound was maddening, like the whine of a mosquito turned up and amplified a hundred-fold. It forced her to her knees, releasing Kris so she could instinctively press her palms over her ears, trying to drown out the sound assaulting her eardrums and splitting her skull with pain.

Something *screamed* inside her, some voice that felt strangely separate from her own. She felt like there was something crawling under her skin, clenching around her heart. A pain in her chest made her double over, fear clawing at her mind. She couldn't breathe. What was *happening* to her?

Movement in the corner of her vision caught her eye and Noelle lifted her head to see a black shape alight atop the Prometheus statue on the other side of the rink. A black shape with wings.

*Oh no…*

Raven the Hunter had joined the fight.

He was saying something, pointing between Electron and Kris, but she couldn't hear him over his sonic weapon. She could still barely move, but that feeling like her skin was crawling was starting to subside, and if she focused she could breathe again. She glanced back at Electon, who was still stalking slowly towards them. She wasn't sure what monsters made of living lightning used for ears, but he seemed to be unbothered by the noise. He was smiling as he moved to lift that ball of lightning he'd been forming and throw it down at them.

"Look out!" she cried, but of course Kris couldn't hear her - they were still on their knees trying to block out that head-splitting whine, their eyes squeezed shut. They didn't seem as badly affected as she had been, but they were still too distracted to notice the danger from behind.

Instincts from long hours of training and practice kicked in, and Noelle did the only thing she could think of. She held up her left arm, pressed a button on the side of her web-shooter, and launched one of the quick-expand web shields compressed into a cartridge on the side of the device. It was something she'd designed for emergencies when spinning a web was too slow; she'd taken inspiration from the airbags in a car.

It worked perfectly, expanding to form a thick, round wall attached to her wrist in little more than a second flat. But she'd never tested her web fluid against electric current like this. It wasn't the most conductive substance, but it still struggled to absorb the energy, sending a shock of tingly heat up her arm as the webbing began to catch fire.

That sonic was making it nearly impossible to think, and her head was pounding. She had to make it stop before she blacked out. When she checked her palm where it had been pressed against her ear, she saw blood on her hand. She coughed, doubling over and abruptly beginning to choke. She felt like she might vomit, and when her stomach heaved, something dribbled from her mouth. Blood so dark it looked black…

She could feel the blood leaking from her ears and nose now, too. All her insides felt like they were in revolt. Her hand shook as she reached her arm towards the device tied to the spear. She'd made harder shots, but rarely under worse conditions. She could feel her strength fading, her vision going black. One chance to get this right…

She pressed her fingers tight against the pressure pad on her palm. Her webline snagged the microphone, and she ripped it off the spear and into her hand, crushing it with a curled fist. The violent sound abruptly stopped, leaving only a ringing echo like the afterimage of bright light on the back of your eyelids.

Though she was left still shaky, Noelle felt her strength returning, rushing back into her. She took a moment to rip the skates from her hooves and throw them away, before doing the same for Kris, leaving them barefoot on the ice but at least able to stand without falling. She then ejected the flaming shield from her web-shooter and kicked the disintegrating mass of webbing away before it

burned her, trying to shake the tingles out of her left arm, which felt like it was starting to go numb. Better than being fried to a crisp, though.

She pulled off her sweater and leggings, and slipped out of her skirt, discarding the clothing to reveal her costume underneath. She retrieved her mask from her pocket and pulled it over her head. If she was going to face death, she'd do it dressed for the part - and not letting her enemies see the fear in her eyes.

"Spider-Doe!" Raven cawed down at her from the statue. She could barely make out what he was saying through the ringing in her ears. "I told you this hunt wasn't over!"

"You brought backup this time, did you?" Noelle shouted at him. She had to guesstimate how loudly she was actually speaking; even her own voice was hard to hear clearly. "What honor is there in taking me down if you can't do it without help?"

"A mutually beneficial partnership," Raven smirked. "My electric associate's vendetta is with Spider-Human. He's here to make sure your partner doesn't interfere while I kill you."

While Raven yapped, Noelle busied herself with pulling Kris up from their hands and knees. Their ears were bleeding, too, and she could feel them shaking underneath their sweater. But they recovered more quickly than she had, holding onto her for support only long enough to get up, before standing back to back with Noelle, facing Electron while she stared down Raven.

"One for each of us, h-huh?" Kris said. They were trying to put bravado in their tone, but she could hear the way their voice shook.

"Are you up for this?" she whispered.

"Do I have a choice?"

"Keep Electron distracted. Raven's only after me. I'll take him out fast so I can help you."

She felt Kris brace themself against her back.

"Come on, little spider," Electron's crackly voice snapped. "Come and ride the lightning!"

Kris leapt away and Noelle rushed forward, running across the cracked ice as Raven swooped down to meet her, a knife in his hand. He tried to slash at her with it, but she elbowed his hand to deflect his aim and ducked her head, the knife grazing her hard antlers instead.

She slammed into Raven head-first and knocked him to the ice, pinning his wing under her knee so he couldn't stab her. He struggled with his unnatural strength, but she slammed a fist into his face and heard him grunt as his head cracked against the ice. Behind her she could hear the crackle of electricity and that distorted voice shouting for Kris to stay still. There was no time to play around, not with Kris in danger. Noelle needed to finish this fast. She needed to

**Break him. Destroy the one who made us hurt.**

She blinked, hesitating with her fist drawn back. That thought…that *hatred*... where had that come from?

Once again she felt the sudden, sickening sensation of something moving under her skin. A sensation she'd felt before…in that void, back at Gastcorp.

And then the feeling was blotted out by stabbing pain, agony like hot fire emanating from several points on her abdomen and side. Noelle cried out and looked down, expecting to see another knife, but instead she saw Raven's talons protruding into her stomach. Unable to fight back any other way while pinned beneath her, he had stabbed her with his own clawed foot.

He pulled his claws out: the long, curved hooks of a bird of prey, smeared with blood. She slumped back, clutching her stomach and letting Raven wiggle out from under her as she tried to put pressure on her wounds. Not the deepest wounds, not as deep as a knife would have cut, but four puncture marks, all of them bleeding. This was bad.

Raven stood watching her with a look of triumph on his face. Why wasn't he attacking? "So here we are at last, my prey. The end of the hunt draws near."

Noelle staggered forward, swinging a punch, but suddenly she couldn't see very well. Her arm felt leaden, numb and heavy. Her vision swam, and what was left of the ice seemed to glow, all the lights and colors of the square abnormally bright. Everything seemed to warp and distort, shapes pulling and bending like putty.

She felt dizzy, nauseous. Pain spread from her abdomen, and it was more than just the pain of a stab wound. It felt like her blood was burning.

She had felt this before. "You…poisoned me again?" But how? The first time they'd fought, he'd slashed her stomach with a poisoned knife, but she had been ready for that, she'd avoided his blade…

But not his talons. The knife had been a misdirection. He'd known she would focus on it, and leave herself open to the weapon she wasn't expecting.

**Poison. Venom in the blood. Noelle-Host is tainted.**

Noelle fell to her knees, her stomach heaving, coughing up something hot and metallic-tasting onto the ice. She looked down at her hand clutching her stomach, expecting to see blood, but her hand was stained in…black? Why was her blood black?

*I'm hallucinating,* she thought. Her thoughts felt far away, like they belonged to someone else.

Raven's fist slammed into her jaw and she twisted and fell, collapsing onto the ice. She painfully pulled herself up, lifting her head. Kris? Where was Kris? She needed them. They couldn't leave her to fight alone, not now, not now, not like this.

That's when she heard the scream.

Her vision was still swimming, seeing double, the lights and colors still blending together into a blurry, melting landscape. But she could see clearly enough.

She saw Kris, on the ice, jerking and twitching and screaming. She saw Electron looming over them, pouring voltage into their body like a live wire had fallen on them. Somehow, while she had been fighting Raven, Kris had gone down.

And they weren't getting back up.

They were *screaming.*

"KRIS!!" Noelle screamed. She tried to stagger to her feet, tried to reach out a hand to shoot a web, to do something, *anything,* but she could barely move and her whole body burned. The poison was acting fast.

**Noelle-Host is dying.**

Behind her, Raven pulled her mask from her face, sending her hair cascading down in messy waves around her head. He took a fistful of that hair and yanked her head back by the scalp. "You fought well, Spider-Doe. But every hunt must come to an end eventually. Take comfort in the knowledge that though your life ends here, your name will live long in my legacy of conquests."

*No… Kris…please…*

**We do not want to die. We have only just begun to live.**

Noelle's fading vision was focused entirely on Kris's twitching, convulsing form, though it was like seeing them from the far side of a vast tunnel. They were all that mattered, and they were so far away…

She hardly even noticed the knife at her throat.

**I will not let Noelle-Host die.**

Her vision went black.

Then so did the rest of her.

Noelle felt something *push* upwards out of her back and slam against Raven, knocking him away. That feeling of something shifting beneath her skin had given way to a rush of euphoric power, energy flooding her inside and out. There was something coating her like an oily second skin over her costume, but she didn't feel afraid. She felt *strong.*

She sprinted towards Electron, her muscles moving as if on their own, unburdened by pain and fatigue. Her vision had cleared and she could distinctly see Kris lying on the ground in a pool of melted ice and steaming water, their sweater singed, the wool curling into red-tipped embers. They weren't moving.

Noelle let out a primal roar of fury. Electron snapped his head around to look at her, and she felt a thrill of pleasure at the shock on his face. He instinctively raised his arm and sent a blast of lightning at her.

Noelle took it directly in the chest.

And it didn't hurt. It didn't even *tickle.*

**HahahahahAHAHA! THIS FEELS *WEIRD!***

She wasn't sure why she'd thought that. She didn't feel anything at all - which was itself pretty weird. Maybe she was numb from the poison. Maybe she was losing her mind and hallucinating all of this. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered except the fight.

Electron poured on the voltage, and somehow, it all just rolled off her back. If anything, it made her feel even *stronger,* like her body was on fire, but in a good way this time. Fury was supercharging her cells. Her hands were coated in black and her skin was roiling and boiling and seething and she was full of power and strength and she was going to **destroy** this evil monster who had hurt Kris, she was going to make him **hurt** until he could never hurt anyone else ever again.

The current stopped, Electron's strength running out. He had put everything he had into that attack, and now he looked diminished, dim and exhausted. Scared.

And he should be.

Noelle grinned wide, sparks of electricity flowing through her body and fizzing out into nothing. **"Our turn."**

She lunged for him, plunging her hands into the buzzing mass of energy that was his body and **tearing** and **hitting** and **hurting,** frenzied and furious, no reason or intelligence guiding her hands, only raw black rage. She couldn't hurt this villain the way she could a monster of physical matter, couldn't bruise flesh or break bones or make him bleed. *She* should have been the one who got hurt touching *him.* But instead every blow seemed to draw something out of him, draining him, ripping away the essence of him as her fists struck deep.

And she knew that somehow, she could **kill him.** She could *win.*

She heard a tiny, horrified voice from behind her, so faint that it almost wasn't a voice at all, croak, "N-Noelle?"

Noelle froze. She looked behind her. Kris's eyes were open, their pupils dilated and the whites bloodshot. Their mouth hung open and there was blood trickling from it. And they were looking at her with an expression just like the one on Electron's face. An expression of fear.

Her breath caught in her throat and she looked past them, unable to bear the sight. Her gaze fell on Raven, watching from the other end of the rink. The expression he wore was one of awe, intimidation, and underneath those things, buried in those beady black eyes, a deep desire. But as she watched, he turned and flapped his wings and took off into the night before she could give chase.

Electron had gone limp underneath her. He was barely more than a thin human-shaped fizzle of sparks now, more static electricity than live wire. Part of her still wanted to hurt him, to finish what she'd started.

But Kris was alive. Alive and watching.

She scrambled off Electron and limped to Kris's side. Her heart was beating fast, the pain in her stomach returning, and her vision was beginning to blur again. Whatever well of strength she'd drawn from was running dry, and there was still poison in her veins. She couldn't hold it back forever.

But maybe she had saved Kris.

She fell to her knees next to them, reaching out a black hand to touch their face. Their hair was burnt, and there were red inflamed lines running up their neck and across the side of their face, a strange pattern. It looked like frost on a window, or…or the branches of a Christmas tree. "Kris…"

They flinched from her touch and she drew her hand back, not wanting to hurt them. "Noelle…" Their eyes were wide and bleeding around the edges. They coughed when they tried to speak, a weak wheezing sound.

"Oh god," Noelle moaned. The mask over her face flowed - *dissolved?* - away, letting her see them with unobstructed eyes. Though they were just a blur by this point, tears mixing with her tainted vision as her head swam and her heart thumped slow and heavy in her chest. "Oh no, Kris, please, don't try to move. You're gonna be okay. I'm going to g-get you help, okay? Just hang on."

But she needed help too. Where had everybody gone? Where were the police? She thought she heard sirens, but they were so faint. So distant. They weren't going to get there in time.

Where had her strength gone? Why couldn't she move anymore? Why wasn't anyone there to help her?

"Noelle," Kris whispered. "What…what…"

"Shhh, shhh, it's okay, Kris," she said, stroking their scared face. Her hand wasn't black anymore. Just the red of her costume's gloves, like normal. "Don't try to talk. You're gonna be okay." She turned her head, raised her voice, shouting to no one, "HELP! I NEED HELP!"

Kris was staring at her, and they still looked frightened, vulnerable and confused. "What…happened to you?"

And then their eyes closed and their head lolled back, their body hanging limply in her arms.

*"Kris."* Her voice was a whine between her teeth, small and strangled, cracking in her tight throat. She couldn't breathe.

Kris wasn't moving.

“Help us…somebody, please…” One last desperate prayer.

Her vision was going red. Clouding up. It was the strangest thing: she thought she could see a door, or at least the outline of one, a few feet away. A door to nothing. It hadn’t been there before. She must be hallucinating.

Everything was red. The door was red. It was opening and it was bright. Something was stepping out of it, some shape, formless, flowing. All red. Filling her vision.

She felt weightless. Red was all that she could see now. The world had gone scarlet.

And then it went black.

# Chapter 10: The Last Door

Noelle wasn't sure at first if she was alive or dead, awake or dreaming. As her eyelids fluttered open, she found that her vision was still blurry, and it was hard to decipher meaning from the smears of color and vague shapes. And yet the world did seem stabler somehow, the colors more muted and her surroundings no longer spinning and tilting around her.

She focused for a second on her other senses, trying to ground and orient herself. Pressing her fingers against a padded surface, she could tell from touch that she was lying down on something soft - perhaps a bed or a sofa. Inhaling deeply, she could smell a mix of aromas; tea and herbs and old paper. No one scent was overpowering, but together they made a heady blend. Wherever she was, it was warm, far warmer than the crisp air outside had been. Or maybe that was just her. She still felt feverish, her blood running hot, and when she tried to move, the pain made her wince - she was sore all over, like her superpowered body was exhausted in a way that she hadn't known was still possible for her.

And she could still feel something moving beneath her skin, cold and wet like the touch of an ice cube along her arm, only *inside her*.

Noelle gasped as she tried to sit up in a panic and felt stiffness cramping her muscles. It was a soft exhalation, but in the quiet, dusty air around her, the sound carried. Another sound came in response immediately after: footsteps padding across the floor, approaching her. For a moment, Noelle panicked, gritting her teeth with a hiss as she tried to move faster than her aching body would allow.

A hand on her shoulder gently pushed her back down against the pillow. A woman's voice accompanied the touch, one with a slight lilt to it, an accent Noelle couldn't place. "Easy, child. Rest. You've been through a terrible ordeal."

"Wh-who…" Noelle croaked. It took a moment for her eyes to focus on the figure kneeling in front of her, but when she squinted and the blur solidified, she still didn't recognize them.

A vulpine monster with a long fox-like snout was looking down at her. The woman had long curly brown hair that was tied back by a large bow in the shape of a pair of pointed arches, and she wore a scarlet kimono wrap that ended in a skirt around her legs, as well as boots of a matching color. The bright red of her robe faded into a deep purplish-black when it reached the skirt, and it looked to Noelle like the garment was speckled with stars, a miniature cosmos that twinkled and shifted with the slightest movement.

And was it just her addled senses, or were there stars in the woman's hair as well? When she turned her head it looked like it left an afterimage: A streak of light that glowed like a comet's tail. Or perhaps the long bushy tail of a fox. The woman had no such tail on her actual body, but when Noelle unfocused her eyes, she could almost see the impression of one in the air behind her, like pieces of her were hidden, somehow both in plain sight and yet just out of view.

Noelle blinked, slow and hard. She must still be hallucinating. She swallowed a dry mouthful of saliva and tried again. “Who are you?”

“My name is Ceroba Maximoff,” the strange woman said. “And you are Noelle Holiday, am I correct?” Her gaze flicked briefly to the stylized antlers emblem on Noelle’s chest. “If that costume is any indication, at least.”

Noelle suppressed a shiver. The woman was beautiful, almost ethereal, and while she didn’t seem threatening exactly, Noelle couldn’t help but be wary of beautiful strangers who had…what? Kidnapped her? Or saved her? Her spider-sense was dormant, not giving her so much as a prickle, but after what she’d just experienced, how could she rely on her uncanny sixth sense to be an accurate judge of danger? For all she knew, whatever she’d been poisoned with was dampening it.

For all she knew, this Ceroba lady was working with the villains that had attacked her. Trying to get her guard down, lure her into some kind of trap.

“Please, drink this,” Ceroba said. “It will help restore your strength.” She was holding out a cup of tea on a saucer; Noelle hadn’t noticed where she’d produced the items from, but now she was kneeling in front of the sofa - it *was* a sofa she was lying on, Noelle suddenly noted - offering the cup to Noelle.

Noelle scowled at the tea, not even trying to hide her fear that the medicine might be worse than the disease. “I’m sorry if this sounds rude, but…how do I know this is safe to drink?”

Ceroba’s muzzle curled in a slight smile, though she looked more bemused than sinister. “Are you always so distrusting of everyone you meet?”

“I meet a lot of people who try to kill me.”

Ceroba straightened up and set the saucer and cup on an end table near Noelle’s head, frowning at her. “I’ve just spent several hours *removing* a toxin from your body and nursing you back to health - hours that you spent unconscious and at my mercy. It would be rather counterproductive to go to all that effort only to turn around and harm you now, don’t you think?”

It was a fair point, but that wasn’t the part that caught Noelle’s attention. *“Hours?”* she sputtered. “I don’t have *time* for tea! Where’s Kris? What happened to them?”

She tried to stand up, bolting upright and getting to her hooves, but her legs buckled under her and she would have fallen, had Ceroba not grabbed her shoulders to steady her.

“Easy, Noelle. Your friend is in the hospital. I did all I could to save them, but they were very badly electrocuted, and some injuries are beyond my ability to treat, especially in a human of enhanced physiology. I was able to restart their heart and heal the superficial burns, but I fear that even if they live, they may have suffered severe damage to their muscles and nerves. They are being cared for by their own kind’s physicians now - all we can do is pray.”

*Restart their heart… If they live…* The words stuck in Noelle's own heart like thorns. "I have to go. I have to see them."

She shrugged off Ceroba and tried again to stand unaided. Noelle's gaze quickly scanned the room, looking for an exit, and it was only then that she really took in her surroundings properly. She was in the back room of a shop - an apothecary of some kind, from the looks of it. Green-trimmed glass display cases lined the walls, containing neat rows of jars and bottles in all shapes and sizes. There was a counter along the far wall, complete with an ancient-looking cash register. Behind it were even more shelves stuffed with medicines and tinctures, along with many long rows of small square drawers, each one marked with a handwritten label. Old-fashioned chandeliers with big glass casings like oil lamps hung from the ceiling alongside bundles of dried herbs, the bulbs illuminating the room with a soft orange light.

"Noelle, wait!" Ceroba protested, trying to grab her shoulder again, but Noelle jerked her arm away and staggered forward, through a bead curtain in a curved archway that led out into another, larger room. She stumbled as she went, dragging her hooves while Ceroba followed worriedly after her. She wished she could walk more quickly, but her left leg didn't want to move properly, and she was reduced to limping. Her middle throbbed with every step, though when she touched it, she noticed that the flesh where Raven's talons had pierced her felt like it had knitted already, and the spot was sore but no longer bleeding.

She limped her way into the main room of the shop. This part looked less like an apothecary and more like a new-age bookstore. Shelves of books lined the walls with labeled sections like "Astrology" and "Divination," though she didn't stop to look more closely at the titles on the spines. Nor did she give more than a passing glance to the display cases of crystals and statues and other vaguely mystical-looking baubles. None of it was of any interest to her at that moment, because she had spotted the front door - the shades on the windows drawn, the sign flipped to display "OPEN" to the shop's interior and "CLOSED" to the outside world.

Ceroba was calling for her to come back, but Noelle ignored her. She was stumbling towards the door, reaching a trembling hand for it, when she froze, her spine forced straight upright as if by an unseen hand. She looked down in a panic and found that she was enveloped in a red glow. She strained, but couldn't move her arms or legs, held tight by some bodiless force.

"I told you to *wait, damn it,"* Ceroba snapped. Noelle glanced over her shoulder and saw Ceroba standing a few paces away, her skirt billowing around her ankles. The woman's eyes were glowing a bright red.

And then Noelle began to float off the ground.

She was so surprised that she didn't cry out, didn't even protest as she was lifted a couple feet into the air. "Sit down before you hurt yourself," she heard Ceroba say, and an entire armchair flew from the corner of the room and settled underneath her. Noelle was deposited, rather gently all things considered, into the plush chair, which spun around on its own to face the room. The crimson glow around her body faded, and she found she could move again.

But she didn't dare try to stand up. Ceroba had settled into a cross-legged position facing her, floating just above the ground, and if Noelle had thought the shopkeeper looked strange before, it was nothing compared to her appearance now. Her eyes were still glowing, and her hair seemed to swirl in a nonexistent breeze, the strands lifted upwards around her head. Her kimono was no longer merely red, but alive with wisps of scarlet mist curling off the fabric. But none of that, not even her levitation, was the strangest part. What really took Noelle's breath away were the ghostly crimson outlines of giant fox tails that had appeared in the air behind her - nine of them, circling her in a ring, undulating slowly as they hovered there. The whole room appeared darker suddenly, cast in an eerie red that sent long shadows across the walls.

"I've been trying to tell you," Ceroba said with no small measure of frustration. Noelle noticed there was now a faint echo to her voice, as if she were speaking in a space much larger than the little shop. "You aren't fully healed yet. I coaxed the toxin out of your veins and bottled it safely away, but you're still weak. And you took some shocks yourself while fighting those thugs, which accounts for your stiff muscles - though I believe the…unique properties of your costume helped ground you and spared you from worse harm. But I would be remiss to let you leave now, when you're still likely to hurt yourself in the attempt."

Noelle gritted her teeth angrily. She was reminded vividly of when Dr. Gaster had abducted her and claimed it was a medical intervention. "So I'm a prisoner?"

"You're a *patient,"* Ceroba explained firmly. "This is a place of healing. The door appeared to you and brought me to your side because you required my aid, and I intend to finish providing it. It is a responsibility that I take seriously."

"The door…" Noelle repeated. She remembered a door, but she had thought it was a figment of her drugged mind. Only now, looking over at the entrance to the shop, she noted that the door there looked exactly the same as the one she had seen. It, too, was cast in glowing scarlet, as though it had a life of its own.

She pointed at it. "That door?"

"The Last Door," Ceroba nodded. "It takes me to those who are truly desperate, or vice versa. Even I don't know where it originated from. It appeared to me as well, when I was at…a low point in my life, and brought me to this Emporium. A door without a wall; a woman without a purpose; a shop without a shopkeeper. It would seem that the three of us have decided to stick together for the time being." She turned her head to look at the unassuming wooden doorway and snorted, her nostrils flaring. "Perhaps the Last Door is paying its penance as well."

"Penance?" Noelle frowned. "What would a door have to atone for?"

Of course, the bigger question was what Ceroba meant by 'as well,' but that felt too personal to ask her directly, even if the woman's words invited speculation.

"They say that every time one door closes, another opens," Ceroba mused. "It stands to reason then that the reverse is also true. Maybe the Door understands

what I once did not: That there can be nothing gained without sacrifice, nothing created without loss."

That all sounded a little ominous to Noelle, but she didn't have the patience for shadowy insinuations and verbal puzzles. "Please, I know you're trying to help, but I can't stay here. I have to go see Kris. They need me."

"Like I said, child, there's nothing you can do for them right now. But if seeing them will ease your anxiety, then perhaps…"

Ceroba raised her hand and wiped her palm across her forehead. When she removed her hand, Noelle started in surprise. A third eye, glowing gold instead of scarlet, had appeared on the center of her forehead, just above the other two.

"Normally this would be beyond my powers, but since I was just working healing magics upon your friend's body, I am still somewhat attuned to the energies of their SOUL," Ceroba explained. "Perhaps enough to briefly become a mystical fly on the wall, so to speak."

She turned her gaze to an empty spot on the floor, and a glow like a spotlight emanated from her uncanny third eye. In that pool of light formed an image like a three-dimensional hologram, cast in sparks of glowing gold, but still distinct enough to be recognizable.

It was Kris, in a hospital bed. They lay perfectly still, eyes closed. Their charred clothing had been replaced with a thin paper gown, and a tube ran from their arm and out of the pool of light, the shape dissolving into golden sparkles. Around their bed stood a couple of less distinct humanoid figures, mere outlines of light - doctors, presumably.

"Kris!" Noelle gasped, covering her mouth with her hand. "Oh Kris, oh no…"

She felt tears prick her eyes, and the urge to rush to their side was overpowering, even though she knew this was only an image - maybe not even real, maybe just some cruel illusion - and not her flesh and blood partner before her.

But then she noticed one additional detail, one that allowed her to breathe again: A heart monitor by their bed. Its form was blurry and faint compared to Kris themself, but she could still see the line moving repetitiously across the screen, short but steady spikes, *up down, up down, up down.*

And then the image faded, and left Noelle staring at thin air, tears wetting the fur of her cheeks.

Ceroba's scarlet glow faded with it, as did her nine tails and third eye, and she stretched out her legs and alighted gently on the floor. Now that she was standing, and not glowing, she suddenly looked much more normal again, just a monster in a red kimono minding a quiet shop with no customers. Even the door behind her looked like just an ordinary wooden door again, instead of some supernatural portal.

Noelle eyed that door and the glow of streetlights through the blinds, but she didn't try to get up. Not yet.

Instead she looked at Ceroba and repeated her original question. “Who *are* you?”

Ceroba shrugged. “Just a woman trying to make up for past mistakes.” She looked at Noelle, her mouth a tight line, and added, “You and the Dreemurr child remind me of myself, you know. When I was younger and more…inexperienced. We are all driven by something, be it idealism or loyalty or regret. We all want to be better, to find our place, to do right by others - though we don’t always succeed at that. But if I may give a word of advice: One would do well to remember that power is not the same thing as *permission.”*

Noelle didn’t really know what that meant, but it was hard to decipher Ceroba’s words. Hard to think about anything but Kris in that hospital bed. She wiped at her eyes with her costumed forearm and sniffled. “I don’t feel very powerful right now.”

“After seeing what you did on that ice skating rink, I’d like to have a talk about exactly how powerful you are.” Ceroba walked past Noelle’s chair, back into the apothecary. “But first, let me fetch that cup of tea for you. I cannot mend the troubles in your heart, Noelle, but with the right brew, I can certainly restore vigor to your limbs.”

****

Noelle sipped her tea, and she had to admit that it helped. She wasn’t sure exactly what Ceroba had put in it, but every sip felt like a surge of strength, easing her aches and pains and making her feel more like herself.

Well, except for that stirring inside her, that strange feeling she didn’t fully understand. It alarmed her, and yet…whatever it was had helped save her, too, and helped her save Kris. It had given her power. So maybe it wasn’t something to be afraid of.

Ceroba sat in a chair across from Noelle’s seat on the sofa, curled up in that cross-legged pose she seemed partial to. At least she wasn’t floating now, which certainly made her feel less intimidating. Noelle was still itching to get to Kris’s bedside, but now that she had let herself relax a little - and was reasonably certain that Ceroba wasn’t a threat - her curiosity was surfacing. And if she got Ceroba talking, then she wouldn’t have to sit in silence, her mind consumed with worry.

“How did you do those things back there?” she asked. “I’ve never seen a monster do anything like that.”

“I come from a place where it’s more common for monsters to use magic,” Ceroba said, sipping her tea. Noelle couldn’t tell if her drink was a magic brew too or just a normal one - it smelled like earl gray. “But even then, there’s magic and then there’s sorcery. One is an innate talent, the other is a learned art.”

“So you’re like…some sort of witch?”

Ceroba chuckled. “I prefer the term sorceress. If you wouldn’t mind.”

It appeared that was all the explanation she wanted to give, but Noelle wasn’t ready to let the distraction lapse into silence just yet, so she pressed for more. “What else can you do, besides light shows and levitation?”

“Oh, many things,” Ceroba said vaguely. A shadow passed over her face and she added, “Too many, perhaps.” She set down her empty cup and leaned closer, hands clasped in her lap. “I’d rather talk about what *you* can do. Noelle, when I was healing you, siphoning the poison from your body, I found something… anomalous.”

That slithering feeling ran down Noelle’s spine again, making her straighten up, suppressing the urge to scratch at her skin. “Wh-what sort of something?”

“The sort I’ve never seen before,” Ceroba frowned. “And I’ve seen more than you can imagine. But from what I sensed when I was scanning you with my Eye, it seems like something has…latched onto you. Infesting your body, like a parasite.”

Noelle swallowed and hunched in on herself, feeling suddenly queasy. “You mean…it’s alive? Is it dangerous?”

The question earned her a sharp, probing look from Ceroba. “It’s difficult to say. It could be benign - there are many symbiotic organisms in nature that survive by bonding with a host, but that do no harm and can even provide the host animal with benefits.” She paused before adding pointedly, “And then there’s cancer. Tell me, have you come into contact with anything…mystical lately?”

It felt almost as hazy as a bad dream now, but if she concentrated Noelle could still remember that inky blackness in the void that had overtaken Gastcorp. The way it seemed to move and squirm like a living thing. The way it had crawled up her arm when she touched it.

She shuddered. “I might have, yeah.”

Ceroba’s frown deepened, wrinkles of worry creasing her brow. She held out her hand. “May I see your arm?”

Noelle held her arm out for inspection, curious where this was going.

“You’ll need to remove that device on your wrist.”

Noelle hesitated, but only for a second - Ceroba had meant well so far, and she *did* want answers. So she unhooked the web-shooter and set it aside on the sofa.

Ceroba took her hand and turned it palm up, then gently rolled down the sleeve of Noelle’s costume. She began to trace her fingertips down Noelle’s arm, feeling the flesh under the fur. There was a soft scarlet glow from the points of her fingers, and Noelle felt a warm tingling feeling on her skin. It felt like touching those glass lightning balls at the science museum, not painful or unpleasant, just a strange tickle.

She squirmed a little, but Ceroba held her arm tighter. “Stay still, please. There’s something in the veins…”

The sorceress traced the veins of Noelle’s arm up to her palm, moving those tingling fingertips in circles like she was stirring a beverage. And as Noelle watched with equal parts fascination and revulsion, something black and oily began to pool in her palm like it was welling up from a fountain under the pores of her skin.

When Ceroba lifted her fingers, the black stuff stuck to her and spread from palm to fingertips, like glue. Or like her web fluid.

A thought welled up in Noelle’s mind unbidden. **Don’t let her separate us.**

She yanked her arm away, the black substance snapping back into her palm, and took a step back. Noelle looked down, startled, at her clenched fist - when had she closed it? - and found it was engulfed in roiling, seething black tar.

Ceroba took a step towards her and she held up her other hand in warning. “Stay back!”

**Destroyer! Chaos! Don’t let her touch us!**

A sudden burst of emotions flared up inside her: Fear. Anger. Tension. She experienced them with a confusing mix of immediacy and distance. She felt them so sharply, and yet at the same time, part of her wasn’t feeling any of those things. Like someone else’s feelings had been poured into her brain.

She felt contaminated. Violated. Horrified.

And yet…the more she examined those external feelings, the more she realized that the thing inside her didn’t feel malicious. It just felt scared.

“Noelle?” Ceroba said. “Are you alright?”

Noelle took a deep breath and forced herself to think rationally, like a scientist instead of an overwhelmed and frightened teenager. What was it Gaster had said? *A force that is part of the fabric of the universe, capable of either consuming us or being harnessed by us.*

With effort, she made herself calm down, soothing those turbulent emotions in her head and heart. *I won’t hurt you,* she thought. *I promise.* And slowly, the black substance retreated back inside her hand, leaving only unblemished fur.

“I’m sorry, Ceroba.” Noelle collapsed back onto the sofa, exhausted. “I don’t understand it, but whatever it is, it has feelings. I don’t think it means any harm. It protected me. And I think it wants me to protect it, too.” Why else would it have given her such power? She remembered that feeling of invincibility, of strength beyond what even her enhanced body was capable of alone. Without that boon, she and Kris might have died before Ceroba even got there.

But Ceroba seemed skeptical. “And is that what *you* want, child? You don’t know how deeply intertwined with you this thing might already be.” Her hands glowed

lightly, the color of blood. “I could attempt to remove it, like I did the poison that was killing you…”

“Can you promise that doing that won’t hurt it?”

Ceroba narrowed her eyes. “No,” she admitted. “But Noelle, I don’t like leaving you in this state. For all you know that thing could be killing you. Are you certain this is a risk you want to take?”

“It feels like I’d be taking a risk no matter what I do,” Noelle said. She straightened up, trying to project a confidence she wasn’t sure she really felt. “I don’t think it’s making me sick or anything. I think…I think I need to learn more before I freak out and do something drastic.”

Ceroba took a deep breath, her hands raised in an almost defensive-looking posture, and suddenly Noelle worried she might try to press the issue. If Ceroba wanted to keep her prisoner for real, Noelle had no doubt that she was powerful enough to do so.

“Please,” she said, exhaustion and stress baked into every syllable. “I can’t deal with this right now. I really appreciate all your help, but if I’m not in any immediate danger, then I just want to see Kris. Please, can I go see them now?”

Ceroba let out her breath and dropped her hands. “I won’t keep you here any longer if you want to leave. But I must warn you, Noelle. There is danger in making alliances with forces you don’t understand.”

“I’m not sure I really understand you, either,” Noelle pointed out, “but I’m still glad I met you.”

Ceroba snorted. “A fair point. Should you need anything, you’ll always be welcome here at the Emporium. It can be found at 64 Lotkill Avenue on most days. But I cannot guarantee I will always be there to protect you should you find yourself in danger again. I’m only one woman - I can’t be everywhere I’m needed all at once.”

“That’s okay. You’ve done so much already. Thank you.”

She followed Ceroba out into the main room, then paused by the door. “Oh! I almost forgot to ask, what hospital is Kris in? Where will I find them?”

“Simply step through the Door,” Ceroba told her. “It will take you where you need to go.” She hesitated for a second before adding, “In theory. Sometimes it can be a little…unpredictable.”

“Uh, o-okay!” Noelle said, approaching the door as though it were a wild horse she was about to attempt to ride. “Um, if you don’t mind, Door, I’d like to go to where Kris is.”

“You don’t have to give it instructions,” Ceroba said. “It’s not a taxi driver.”

“Oh,” Noelle said, feeling silly. “Okay, here I go, then!” She put her hand on the doorknob and turned. She pulled the door open and was immediately blinded by

a brilliant red glow washing over her from the doorway. She couldn't see anything through it, just the light.

"Noelle," Ceroba called after her. "One last thing."

Noelle looked over her shoulder, blinking away the spots in her vision from the door's light. "Mhm?"

Ceroba stood awash in the deep glow of red light, making her look both beautiful and eerily blood-drenched. "I must ask that you keep this meeting between us and do not spread tales about me. Though I am not opposed to revealing myself to those in need, I do not seek the sort of publicity that you and the Dreemurr child have experienced. It is my wish that my life remain a private one."

"Of course," Noelle nodded. "I understand." The attack she had just suffered was all the reason she needed to get why Ceroba wouldn't want her secrets getting out. She had given her own safety away much too carelessly. "Do you…have enemies too?"

A smile tugged at the edges of Ceroba's mouth. "None that I can't handle." She made a strange hand gesture, her wrists crossed in front of her chest with the palms facing her and her fingers splayed like wings. "Go now. And may the Angel Above All watch over you."

"Um, thanks!" Noelle said. She was familiar with the Angel, of course, but this terminology and gesture were unknown to her. But then, Ceroba *had* said that she came from a land where things were different. "You too!"

She took a deep breath, and stepped into the crimson light.

As impossible as it seemed, on the other side of the door was a hospital room. The lights were dimmed, and though the room briefly filled with that same eerie red glow, it cut off almost as soon as Noelle had stepped through, leaving her in darkness. She never heard the door close, but when she turned around, it was gone.

Her eyes hadn't quite adjusted yet, but she could see the bed in front of her, and the figure asleep in it. They looked so small in their hospital gown, the pale blue material like a flimsy facsimile of their costume. No one seeing Kris in this condition would be able to guess how strong they were supposed to be.

Strong, but not invulnerable.

"Kris?" Noelle asked, her voice small and choked up. Their hands were lying loosely at their sides, so she knelt and took their left hand in hers. Their skin felt cold compared to her warm fur. "Kris, are you… can you hear me?"

They didn't stir. Their head was drooped limply to the side on their pillow, though someone had taken enough care to brush their hair out of their face. Their skin appeared to be free of burns, but Noelle could faintly see the branching pattern along their arms and face, that strange scar. An intravenous tube had been inserted in their arm, and above the bed, a heart monitor like she had seen in Ceroba's magical image cast them in a pale, electronic green glow. The line on

the monitor was still going *up down, up down, up down* in little spikes, beeping steadily.

Were those spikes supposed to be taller? Did the beeping seem unusually slow? Noelle wasn't sure. She didn't know how fast human hearts were supposed to beat, except from what she'd observed in private moments with Kris. Tender moments curled up close to them with her head on their chest, listening to the *ba-bump ba-bump* rhythm of their heart through their clothes…and perhaps that had been a faster beat than usual.

It hurt, seeing them like this. It hurt to know she had failed to protect them. She had been useless to them. If Ceroba hadn't intervened, Kris might be dead right now. A body in a morgue instead of in a hospital bed, with no heartbeat left at all.

Noelle swallowed thickly and inhaled with a shudder, finally letting out the tears she'd been holding inside. She leaned in and kissed them, but they didn't stir, and the lack of response felt too upsetting to continue, even if she took comfort in the soft breath coming from their slightly parted lips.

"Kris, it's me. I'm here. Please, please wake up." She knelt at their bedside as though in prayer, squeezing their hand. "Please, Kris. I need you to wake up. I can't do this without you."

She'd never had the chance to say goodbye to her father. No hospital beds for Rudy, just a quick and violent end. This felt even worse somehow. There was a finality to her father's death that had been terrible, but impossible not to confront head-on. There had been no suspense to it, nothing but a sudden swerve into a shocking new reality. But here, praying by Kris's side while they hovered with one foot out the door, Noelle felt tortured by every second of uncertainty. Ceroba's words kept echoing in her head: *If they live.*

The heart monitor went *beep…beep…beep.* It didn't slow down, but it didn't get any faster, either.

"Please live," Noelle whispered. Her voice was cracked and barely audible, but she had to believe they could hear her. "Please be okay. You're strong, Kris. I know you are. You're Spider-Human. You can survive this. You can survive *anything."*

They had to. Because if they couldn't, then how on Earth could she?

Noelle prayed. She prayed to the Angel, or the Angel Above All, or whatever you wanted to call it. She prayed to the human gods as well, as many of them as she could remember the names of. She prayed to deities she didn't even know about, just in case they were listening anyways. Anything and everything that might take pity and put a finger on the scales to help Kris.

The heart monitor kept on beeping, and Kris kept breathing, and they did not wake up.

"Please come back to me, Kris. Please don't go away. I can't do this without you."

Noelle squeezed their hand harder, as tightly as she could without hurting them, and her breath got caught in her throat, and Kris did not wake up.

“Kris, I… I love you.”

*Beep…beep…beep…*

“Please…”

# Chapter 11: The Day After

### Alphys

Alphys stood alone in her classroom, waiting for class to start and staring at the vial in her hand. She should have kept it at Gastcorp - it would have been safer there. But something had compelled her to take it with her, to keep it on her person. A compulsion that gnawed at her every time she felt the vial in her pocket.

It had been a long weekend, working nonstop in the Gastcorp labs whenever she wasn't at EMH. Assignments had gone ungraded, lesson plans unmade; she had counted on Kris to pick up the slack for her, and now…well, now she'd be lucky if Kris ever returned to her classroom at all.

Maybe that was why she'd felt this sense of urgency propelling her all week. There hadn't been any clear reason for the feeling. But maybe part of her had known something like this would happen. That had been the reason she was doing this, hadn't it? The sooner someone cracked the code of Noelle and Kris's powers - the sooner new, more adult heroes could be created and trained - the sooner the teenagers would be able to stop putting themselves in harm's way. As cool and inspiring as the Spiders were, as fun as their adventures seemed, this was a matter of life or death. The world was getting dangerous, the police were outmatched, and fighting super-criminals shouldn't be a job for untrained youth.

What had happened to Kris had proven that. And now the city was down one Spider, and Noelle probably wasn't in much of a state to protect anyone right now either. Her mother had already called the school to excuse her absence today (although Carol had insisted that Noelle would be back in class soon).

So Alphys stood in her classroom, exhausted and worried and unprepared, staring at the vial and thinking reckless thoughts. This was only a prototype, but she knew the fact that she'd managed to synthesize a viable formula in just a few days was remarkable on its own.

The thing was, a prototype would require testing and tweaking and countless rounds of iteration, and all of that would take time. Alphys knew that was how science worked: slowly. They could be years out from a finished product. That was, if they didn't run out of blood samples first, which was probably more likely. She'd been racking her brain trying to think of a way to get some more, but she doubted Noelle would agree to provide it. And Gaster had made it clear that if they ran out of that crucial ingredient and had nothing to show for it, he wouldn't be able to justify continuing to fund her research. She *had* to deliver.

She had to prove herself. And she couldn't do that with cautious iterations and incremental steps. Sometimes you had to bet the farm on a single leap of faith.

Alphys had made that sort of bet before and lost. But there was a reason people gambled, and Alphys hadn't taken any risks with her life in a long, long time.

You didn't get to be a hero by playing it safe. And if Kris and Noelle could risk everything for the greater good, then who was she to do any less?

## Susie

Susie returned to school and found, to her annoyance, that everyone was talking about Kris and Noelle.

She'd spent a few days playing hooky, not caring about her attendance or grades, not wanting her father to find her. School would have been the first place he looked. She'd gone first to the church, and Father Murdock had finally taken pity on her and offered her a room: barely more than a broom closet, tucked away under the stairs leading up to the bell tower, but it was a mattress and blanket and a roof over her head. But accepting charity made Susie feel awful, and she'd left in the middle of the first night. She hadn't wanted to get the blind turtle priest in trouble. Better for everyone that she keep her distance.

But after a while, when she'd grown tired of digging through dumpsters in the back alleys of restaurants for discarded food and shivering her way through cold nights sleeping on park benches, she'd been forced to admit that a warm building with a roof over her head wasn't so bad. It wasn't like she actually had to attend services or give confession or anything. She could just sleep there. And in the daytime there was school, and she could stay out of the snow and get free food there. Even if it did mean having to go to class. Wasn't like she had anything better to do.

As for her father, if he really wanted her back, she figured he would find her eventually. Send the cops to track her down or something. Maybe the fact that that hadn't happened yet meant that he really was done with her. What a liberating thought that was.

So she'd come back to school. But it was like she had never left at all. No one had missed her, obviously. No one even bothered to ask where she'd been. No, they were all too busy worrying about their precious heroes.

Apparently Dreemurr was in the hospital. Some attack by a supervillain or something. It was all everyone was talking about, so even though the other kids had a tendency to hush up when they saw her coming, Susie was able to get the idea.

Noelle wasn't in school today either. Susie guessed she was probably at the hospital with Kris. She shouldn't have cared. She'd never liked either of the spider-freaks, even before she knew they were superheroes. But…she'd never wanted anything bad to happen to them either. Sure, she'd often wished she could

make Holiday live Susie's life for a day, make her see how shitty life was when you didn't have a rich family who loved you. And yeah, there was that time that Kris and Noelle lied about her and got her suspended. She'd wanted to beat them up for that. But she wouldn't have put anyone in the *hospital.* Apparently Kris had been electrocuted and now they were in a coma. That was…a lot.

Even when the heroes kinda sucked, it still felt awful to see the bad guys win. What a crappy, stupid world.

Susie stumbled to class before the bell even rang, because where the hell else was she supposed to go? She barely remembered her own schedule. It was English class today, aka Nap class. She was supposed to have read a book or something but who cared? If she had to write a report she'd just use the library computers to look up the book online and then make something up based on the cover. Call it a creative writing assignment. Reading was for nerds anyway.

Nerds like the two bluebirds sitting next to Susie's seat, a few rows of chairs down. Berdly, her favorite reluctant source of spare change - like a vending machine, you sometimes had to shake him a bit to get the money out - and that new kid Martlet who was always obnoxiously cheerful.

Only, she didn't look cheerful today. They both looked really glum, actually. Probably they'd heard the news, too. Must suck having supervillains trying to kill your friends all the time.

Susie sat down in her chair next to them with a heavy thud, making Martlet jump. They'd been so absorbed in conversation, whispering to each other quietly, that they hadn't even noticed her approach. Susie got a moment's amused satisfaction out of seeing Martlet startle…until she noticed the girl looking at her the way someone might look at an alligator that had just crawled out of their toilet.

Oh right. The last time they'd seen each other, Martlet had gotten all up in her face sticking up for bird-brain and her new spider-friends. That already felt like a year ago, but it hadn't been that long. She probably expected Susie to bite her head off, or like, say something rude.

But she didn't have the energy for making fun of anyone right now. Instead, she said, "Hey."

"Heyyyy…" Martlet said, a strained look on her face. She scooted her chair over an inch closer to Berdly's and further away from Susie. Couldn't blame her. Susie probably smelled pretty bad since she hadn't had a shower or a change of clothes in a while. "How's it…going?"

Susie shrugged. "Not great, I guess."

And with that she had pretty much exhausted her conversation skills.

"It is indeed a dark day for East Monsterhatten High," Berdly said dramatically. "No, for all of New Home City. A hero has fallen!"

Susie stared at him while Martlet patted his wing sympathetically. He actually looked like he might burst into tears. Looked like it wouldn't be the first time

today either. Martlet was all sniffly and shit too. Angel, they were taking this thing with Dreemurr hard.

It made part of her mad. She hadn't been talking about the spiders, but once again, everyone only cared about them and not her. Her life was no picnic either! How come no one had any sympathy for *her?*

*Because they don't know, dumbass. And you're not about to tell them you beat up your dad and ran away from home. Besides, at least you're not in the hospital right now, so what the hell do you have to complain about? At least when you fight the bad guys, you win.*

All the moping was really bringing down her already shitty mood. "Hey, Dreemurr's tough," she said. "They're literally super strong. They'll pull through."

"I hope so," Martlet said dejectedly. "I hope they get better in time for the school dance, too. I'm going to be *so* sad for Noelle if she doesn't get to go with them like they'd planned."

"R-Right, the dance…" Berdly said, swallowing thickly. "Um, about that."

"Oh my god the *matching web gowns!"* Martlet wailed. "I just pictured Noelle in a beautiful web dress alone in the corner and I'm gonna start crying again!"

"I'm, uh…I'm sorry," Susie found herself saying, mostly to stop Martlet from actually crying. "About Kris, I mean."

The bluebirds stopped their sniffling and stared at her like they were witnessing a miracle. Angel's sake, that just made her feel even worse.

"Oh," Berdly said. "Thank you, Susie. That's…nice of you to say."

She was expecting him to launch into another long-winded monologue about how great Spider-Human was or something, but instead everyone just kind of… sat there. In silence. It was awkward. This was exactly why she didn't usually try to talk to people.

"I always thought Kris was weird as hell," Susie said and then immediately regretted it. She didn't know why she said that. It just felt like someone needed to say something to stop that stupid unbearable silence. But why say *that??*

"Um," Martlet said.

"I never liked them," Susie continued, because once you started a runaway train going, why not snap off the brake lever or whatever trains had while you were at it? "Always acting super…superperior…better than me. Like "oh, look, I'm Spider-Human, I'm cool and snarky and mysterious, I can walk on walls, everyone wants to be like me, ooo I'm popular.""

Martlet's uncomfortable look was starting to turn into a glare. Berdly opened his beak and raised a finger but Susie cut him off. "But it still sucks that they got

hurt. I didn't think they *could* get hurt. I mean, I tried. Could hardly ever touch the little freak. Dreemurr's better at dodging punches than anyone I know."

"Susie…"

"Shut up! I'm just trying to say that it sucks! They didn't deserve to get hurt or anything. No one does…" Well, maybe some people. She rubbed at her ribs. Still kinda sore…

"Look," she said, "will you tell Noelle…"

"Tell her what, Susie?" Martlet asked. The face journey she was going on was really throwing Susie for a loop. From nervous to uncomfortable to annoyed to whatever this 'a scary bulldog barked at me but it turned out it just wanted me to pet it' look was.

She should forget this, tell them nevermind and keep her mouth shut. She was being stupid. But to hell with it. Maybe she had enough enemies already. Maybe so did Kris and Noelle.

"Will you tell Noelle that I'm sorry? About the things I said in the church?"

"I'd be happy to pass on the message!" Berdly said enthusiastically, and Martlet gave her an encouraging little smile that should have been insulting but somehow wasn't.

*It's not like you're all friends now,* she reminded herself. These nerds didn't want to hang out with her. They were just happy she wasn't trying to beat them up.

But there was something in the way they were looking at her that Susie hadn't seen on anyone's face in a long time. Something freakily close to respect. And maybe, for today, that was all she needed.

## Dess

Dess paced.

At first she had just paced her room. Then, because she kept tripping over old soda cans while trying to do that, she had finally cleaned her room (or at least thrown out all the trash on the floor and stuffed the dirty laundry in the hamper). That had let her get a good, unobstructed pace in, at least until her room began to feel too small for pacing and she had moved to the living room instead. Much more space for endlessly walking back and forth there.

While she paced, she stared at her phone. Waiting for texts. Skimming the news. Venting frustrations in her server. She'd be streaming right now if she had it in

her to sit still. Even video games weren't enough of an outlet for all the energy in her body.

She wished she'd taken her mom up on that offer to buy a punching bag. She practiced on the couch pillows instead, but they could take it a little *too* well. Soft, feather-filled things that her fist practically sank into. No resistance there. She wanted to hit something firm and feel it bend under the pressure.

Someone had hurt Noelle and Kris. That Raven asshole and some other stupid monster she'd never even heard of. Attacked them right on the ice skating rink in public. The gall of it made Dess's blood boil. How dare anyone harm them? They were just *children.*

Though she supposed she shouldn't have expected any less after Raven had attacked Noelle in her own home. Her mom had ordered the cops to put out an APB on him, but it wasn't going to do anything; cops in this city were lazy when they had to do actual police work, and they had no leads on where Raven was holed up. If they were going to catch him, they would have done it by now. Which meant now Noelle had to worry about him swooping in out of nowhere at every minute of every day, looking to finish the job.

She didn't think she'd ever get used to people trying to kill her little sister. And from what Noelle had told her, texting Dess from the hospital, they'd come damn close to succeeding this time.

So yeah, she wanted to go out there and beat someone to a pulp. Wanted to go to the old mob bars she used to hang out in and raise some hell until she found someone who knew where Raven was. Wanted, at the very least, to go down to those seedy warehouses that smelled like piss and blood where the illegal cage fighting matches she used to participate in were held and take some punches until she could get the images she'd seen on the news knocked out of her head. Those cowards with their cell phone cameras just standing around filming it instead of helping…

Only she couldn't do any of those things, because she couldn't leave her damn house. Her court date was still ages away, her house arrest not ending any time soon. It beat cooling her hooves in the clink, but she was still trapped either way. Nowhere to go, no way to help.

Unless. The thought had been gnawing at her all day. One job, the Tinkerer had said. One job and then freedom. Illicit, secret freedom that would get her sent to jail if anyone found out what she was doing, but freedom nonetheless. She could get out there. Chase down leads. Do what the cops couldn't, and keep her sister safe.

She had declined Tinkerer's offer because it hadn't seemed worth the risk. It would have hurt her family too much if she got caught. But now it was feeling like the greater risk to her family would be sitting around at home doing nothing to help. Waiting for the next time Raven came smashing through a window, or Noelle got ambushed out in the world somewhere. Noelle could have *died.* Kris might *never wake up.* Was she just supposed to sit on her ass and hope that the day never came when she watched her little sister get killed on the news?

If Dess had her way, Noelle would never have become Spider-Doe in the first place. Then she'd be safe. But it was too late to take that back and it would have been hypocritical of her to forbid it after all the reckless shit she'd done. So where did that leave her? Do nothing and let her sister take on all the risk, or do something even more reckless in the hopes that she could make a difference.

Seemed like an easy choice to her.

Dess marched back to her room, hoofsteps beating a determined rhythm up the stairs. Tinkerer had said she would be back. They'd left the door open. And she still had her DMs with Jevil in her Discord history.

She sat down in her computer chair, flipped the browser to the Discord tab that she kept open at all times, and scrolled down her list of notifications. That icon with the dumb clown face was still there, staring at her. Almost like it had been waiting for her.

*Bad idea,* a voice in her head warned. A very small voice that sounded an awful lot like her sister.

She ignored it.

WinterCelebration69: Changed my mind. Offer still open?

**Noelle**

Hours had turned into an entire day, and Noelle had not left Kris's bedside. The hospital staff had been more than a little surprised to find her there, considering she hadn't checked in upon arrival, but she dodged the question of how she'd gotten there, and they didn't press the matter. Apparently Ceroba dropping Kris off at the hospital via magic door portal had already caused something of a stir earlier.

When one of the nurses had explained that there was nothing more to be done for Kris at the moment, that they just had to wait and that Noelle should probably go home and get some rest, she had threatened to web herself to the floor if they tried to remove her. As the night had gone on, and it became clear that Noelle would be staying, they'd given her a fold-out chair and a blanket so she could at least sleep comfortably.

She hadn't used it, though. No sleep for her that night, not with her mind stirred up by worry and her body still energized from Ceroba's rejuvenating tea, like magical caffeine keeping her awake. Not with that faint chemical hospital smell in her nostrils and the steady beep of Kris's heart monitor beating insistently against her ears, a constant reminder that they were alive but not well. The best she could do was to lie down for a while and rest her body, building back up the strength that all that crying had cost her.

When she'd calmed down enough from that first round of tears, she'd called her mother to let her know where she and Kris were. Carol had arrived at the hospital not long after, flanked by an entourage of private security. She'd given Noelle a rare hug, then taken a long moment to regard Kris in the hospital bed with a grim look on her face.

"I should never have let you children put yourselves in danger," Carol had said.

Noelle had seen this argument coming. "It's too late for that," she said, her voice low and sad. "Kris stopped being Spider-Human months ago. It didn't matter. They attacked them anyway. We were just -" The pitch of her voice shot upwards and cracked on the last word. "We were just out on a *date."*

"One of the men who did this, the one calling himself Electron, is in police custody," Carol told her. "If he hadn't been weakened from the fight, he would have been…difficult to apprehend. He's being transferred to a facility where they have specialized cells that can hold him. The other suspect…"

"Raven," Noelle said, and Carol nodded. Hard to forget the guy who had broken into their house not long ago. "He got away. Again."

"We'll catch him. I have Undyne running a city-wide manhunt."

But Noelle shook her head. "They're not going to find him."

"He can't evade justice forever. NHCPD is putting considerable resources into -"

"It's not going to be enough," Noelle said firmly. "The police can't stop a supervillain like this. If they could, then they wouldn't need me."

"About that." Carol braced her palms against the end of Kris's bed, looking down at their lightning-scarred face rather than at Noelle. "I've humored your superhero phase as long as I could, but this has all gone too far. I don't want you doing this anymore, Noelle."

"What? No! Mom!" Noelle sprang to her hooves. "The city needs me! Raven is still out there and -"

"And you are *not* to go after him," Carol said sternly. "Leave it to the police, Noelle. It's time you stopped trying to be a hero and started just being yourself again. You need to think about your future."

"That's what Kris was trying to do," Noelle said. "They wanted to leave it all behind them and be normal." She threw an arm out, gesturing in Kris's direction. "And look how well that worked out for them! You may not like it, Mom, but I'm *not* normal. I have a responsibility. I can't just ignore that!"

But Carol wasn't budging. "The world can survive without Spider-Doe. It always did before."

"You -" Noelle spluttered, outraged that her mother would try to deny her this now, after everything she'd done. She could feel that anger welling up inside her, cold black rage. "You can't stop me! I'm almost 18!"

“And *when* you turn 18,” Carol decreed, “then *maybe* we can revisit the conversation. But I’m still your mother, and so long as you’re still living under my roof, you will abide by my wishes. I’ve let you and your sister run wild for far too long.”

“What does Dess have to do with it?”

“What does -? Noelle, your sister will be lucky if she stays out of prison. And so will you, for that matter. The only reason you’re not behind bars right now is because I’ve been protecting you!”

**No cages. No prison. She wants to trap you!**

“You’re wrong,” Noelle said, taking a step closer to Carol. Her right fist clenched of its own accord and began to turn black, but she hid it behind her leg. “The reason I’m not behind bars is because no cell could hold me.”

A flicker of shock passed over her mother’s face before she controlled her expression. “I’m just trying to keep you safe, Noelle.”

“And I’m trying to keep the *city* safe! Or does that mean nothing to you?”

Carol’s eye twitched slightly, and she took a deep breath. “I can tell you’re under a lot of stress right now. Why don’t you come home? There’s nothing more you can do here. Come home with me and get some rest, and we can talk about this in the morning.”

“Thanks, but I’ll find my own way home,” Noelle said, turning her back on her mother and brushing Kris’s hair out of their eyes. It felt so wrong to talk about this, fight like this, as if they weren’t even in the room just because they couldn’t hear. “When I’m ready.”

She’d expected more arguing. But instead Carol just stood there for a long moment before quietly leaving the room.

## The Other

**It watched the sleeping Krisfriend through the Noelle-Host’s eyes and did not understand.**

**It did not understand why the Krisfriend would not wake. It had saved them from the evil one with the sparks that tickled. The sparks hadn’t even felt *that* bad. And it had defeated the evil and that was supposed to make everything okay. Wasn’t it?**

**But the Krisfriend would not wake up and the Noelle-Host did not feel okay. She felt like she was dying, even though it could not find anything wrong with her body now. That made it feel scared. She had almost died once**

**already, before the Red Witch took the poison out. The Red Witch had wanted to take it out as well, but the Noelle-Host had protected it. Now it had to protect her back.**

**It wrapped itself tighter around a SOUL that felt like it might break at any moment. Trying to hold the Noelle-Host together. Pushing itself into her brain, seeking the red-hot parts and covering them, cooling them. Making the feelings numb, soaking her mind in comforting calm.**

**She slowly stopped crying.**

**It understood that the Krisfriend was important to the Noelle-Host. There was…a connection between them. They were two beings, separate, but also not. It was confusing, but also simple. The Krisfriend was to the Noelle-Host as the Noelle-Host was to it. She needed them to survive. Which meant they needed to survive.**

**But someone had hurt them all. Someone evil. Not just the one with the sparks, but the Raven Man. The Raven Man had almost killed the Noelle-Host. And he had not been destroyed yet. Which meant they hadn't won the fight yet.**

**Suddenly it all made sense. The Krisfriend was not okay because the fight was not over. It would all be okay in the end, when they won.**

**It sent a thought into the Noelle-Host's brain through a tendril. It didn't matter anymore that she wasn't asleep. It knew she would listen.**

**"We should find the Raven Man," it thought. "Find him and destroy him."**

## Noelle

Noelle stood on the roof of the hospital, watching the late afternoon sunset. It had started snowing out, the flakes catching the light burning down against the horizon. She'd eaten only a little, and slept even less, but she still felt wired and alert. Tense like a coiled spring.

She had stayed by Kris's side until their mother had arrived. Toriel had suffocated her with hugs and told her how glad she was that Noelle at least was unhurt. She said that she'd told Asriel what happened and that he would be flying in as soon as he could get away from school. Toriel had tried to get Noelle to stay, saying she was part of the family too, but she wasn't a Dreemurr, not really. The family's grief and fear right now was something she shared, but she didn't feel comfortable bearing witness to it. Toriel should be able to keep vigil for Kris in privacy.

And she'd had enough of sitting around feeling scared. The best antidote to that sort of agony was action. There were things she had to do that she could only do

alone.

She was starting to realize, though, that she wasn't alone at all. That she hadn't been alone since that day at Gastcorp. It had just taken her a while to see it. She'd been too scared to look.

But now she stood looking out at the city skyline, wearing black from head to hoof, and decided it was time to stop hiding from the truth.

*It was me,* she thought, *wasn't it? That 'new' vigilante in black.*

**It was us,** the voice in her head replied.

*What…exactly are you?*

**I don't know. I'm new. Before you, all I knew was darkness. I didn't have words. I barely even had thoughts. You've given me so much.**

*I didn't ask for this,* Noelle tried to protest. *Whatever this is. I didn't agree to it.*

**I know. But you need me,** the voice said. **Like I need you. I can protect you. I can help you hurt evil before it hurts you.**

*You think that's what being a hero is about? Survival of the fittest? The strong beating up the weak?*

**Is that wrong? I'm still trying to figure it out. But I saw your Krisfriend get hurt by the man with the sparks, so I hurt him back. Was that wrong?**

*No,* Noelle admitted. It hadn't felt wrong, that rush of power. It had been the first time in weeks that she felt in control. *That wasn't wrong. It was helpful. You probably saved our lives.*

**I can help in other ways too. Let me show you. Let's swing together. I've been learning how.**

*Okay…* She didn't want to stand still anyways. Not when she'd spent so long just sitting and praying. She cracked her neck and rolled her shoulders, loosening up, feeling the strength in her muscles. Then she jumped off the roof.

With a *thwip* of her webbing she swung downwards in an arc and launched herself into the air, using dual strands attached to the sides of the nearest buildings to yank herself forward like a slingshot. She pushed herself to go faster, heading nowhere in particular, just enjoying the rush of wind and the strength coursing through her limbs.

With this suit on she felt somehow even stronger than usual, like her whole body was reinforced and performing at peak capacity. She didn't even feel the ache from the wounds where Raven had stabbed her. She didn't tire, didn't miss a beat as she swung. She'd done this countless times, but it had rarely felt so effortless.

She could feel that other mind brushing up against hers, telling her subconsciously where to place a webline, when to let go to maximize her

velocity, when to shift her weight into a turn. It was like her brain's capacity had been doubled; suddenly she was taking in information and reacting to it faster than she ever could on her own. Even in the snow, which ordinarily would have made navigation more difficult, she felt like she knew exactly where to go.

It was like she'd discovered how to automate herself. She caught her mind wandering, marveling at this strange new power, but even as she grew distracted, she found that her body continued acting instinctively, letting her websling effectively without taking so much of her focus.

**See? I told you I've been getting good at it!**

*I'm impressed. Can we stop for a minute though? See that water tower over there?*

**Water tower! So that's what those are called!**

She mentally checked out for a moment while her mental passenger brought them to a smooth landing atop the tower, looking out at the city all around them.

This thing was…a rush. It was fascinating, too. She barely understood where it came from or what it even was, but it was obviously intelligent, and it seemed to want to help. And right now, she could use some of that.

*Okay, I'm starting to see the benefits of a partnership,* she told them. *I think we need to establish some ground rules here, though. That thing you did where you took control of my body and went around beating up bad guys while I was asleep? That was not okay.*

**I am sorry. I did not want to scare you. And I needed to learn. I've never had a body before. I've never had a world to live in before. I had to practice. I wanted to learn how to do what you do, so that once I was ready, we could do it together.**

*I think I understand.* It hadn't been that long ago that all of this was new to her, too - at least the part about being a superhero. This entity needed to learn the ropes from her, like she'd learned from Kris. She wished it had asked first, but it probably didn't know any better. *Just don't do it again, okay? People in this world kinda value having control over our own bodies.*

**I understand. I will try not to act without your permission again. Is that satisfactory?**

*Yes, thank you.*

**It feels good though, doesn't it?**

*What does?*

**Defeating the Bad Ones. It made us feel strong. Like we didn't have to be afraid.**

Noelle could feel its eagerness taking hold of her. This was a creature that wasn't used to feeling powerful. And she…well, she had just recently been reminded of how bad it felt to be powerless. Of how she would do anything to avoid feeling that way again.

*It does,* she admitted. *But that's not why I do what I do.*

**Then why?**

Noelle paused, considering the question. Why *did* she do this? To help people, sure. But what did that mean? Usually, it meant doing exactly what her new friend was talking about: defeating the villains, the bad guys, the evil ones who wanted to hurt people. She used violence to shield innocents from other people's violence. Only half the time she failed at it. She had failed to protect Kris. She had failed to protect herself. The only reason either of them were still alive was because of this strange new friend inside her mind. The one who did what she couldn't.

So maybe she wasn't a very good hero after all. But maybe a hero wasn't what she needed to be. Maybe it was time to stop pretending that any of this was about being noble. She had to be a survivor first and foremost, and if she was going to survive - if she was going to protect the ones she cared most about - she needed to be something else. Something stronger.

*You said we should find Raven,* she thought. *Do you know where to start?*

**We should go back to the place with the frozen water. His poison had a distinctive smell. I may still be able to track it.**

*Your sense of smell is that good?*

**I can do lots of things! You'll see. We'll make a good team.**

*Okay,* Noelle thought, leaping off the water tower to start swinging again. The sun was sinking beneath the horizon, shadows draping themselves across the city like the black ink of her new costume, but she was determined now. She had a mission, and she wasn't going to sleep until she saw it through. *Let's go find the bastard who tried to kill me.*

**What will we do when we find him?** the voice thought eagerly.

*We'll stop him from hurting anyone else ever again. We'll get vengeance.*

**Vengeance,** the creature hummed. **I don't know this word. What does it mean?**

The wind rushed in Noelle's ears as she swung through the skyscrapers. Snow swirled in her vision, but her mind was clear and focused. *It means destroying evil.*

# Chapter 12: Transfiguration's Gonna Come For Me At Last

Susie had always kinda hated Fridays. She knew most other students loved them. What was that saying? Thank God It's Friday.

But most other kids had happy homes to spend their weekends in. Susie just had a tiny spare room in a chilly old church. She couldn't even spend the weekend looking for bad guys to beat up, because if she got nabbed by the cops again, her dad would find out and then she'd end up right back in the last place on Earth she wanted to be: at home, trying to keep herself from either killing her dad or getting killed by him.

So no, she wasn't looking forward to the weekend. It was almost enough to make her appreciate the last class of the day, which was Chemistry with Ms. Alphys. Why Susie was taking Chemistry, she had no idea. It wasn't like she was ever going to be a scientist or something. When she'd signed up for the class while filling out her schedule for the semester, she'd been picturing mixing glowing liquids in a test tube and making things explode in puffs of colored smoke, but the reality was a lot more boring than that. Maybe she should have gone with Alphys's biology class instead. At least parts of the body and stuff sounded interesting, kinda.

The one bright spot was that Martlet and Berdly shared this class with her. Before yesterday, she wouldn't have described that as a bright spot, but somehow she had managed to break the ice. It wasn't like they were having slumber parties and making friendship bracelets or whatever friends did, but it was something.

Martlet was being nice to her, which helped a lot; if it had just been Berdly, they would probably have been at each other's throats within minutes. Susie still thought Berdly's constant preening was annoying as hell, but he also seemed really worried about Kris, which was the first time she'd seen him care about anyone besides himself, so maybe he wasn't *that* bad.

Noelle still wasn't in school, for the second day in a row. Not that Susie missed her or anything, obviously…but she was kind of curious. The bluebirds apparently hadn't heard anything from her today.

"She still hasn't answered my texts," Berdly told her and Martlet. They were hunched together along the table in the chem lab, allegedly attempting to work on a group project but mostly just whispering to one another while Alphys was distracted fiddling with something in her pocket. "I would attempt to hail her on our top-secret superhero comms channel, but she's probably not in costume right now. My guess is she's still at the hospital with Kris. Perhaps she forgot to bring her phone charger?"

"How many times have you texted?" Susie asked.

Berdly did a quick count, scrolling up on his phone. "68."

“Better make it 69,” Susie grinned. “Girls love it when you text them exactly 69 times in a row.”

“I don’t think that’s true…” Martlet whispered. “You just need to give her some time, Berdly. I do wish she’d tell us how Kris is doing, though.”

“Eh, Kris is probably the same,” Susie shrugged. “They’re famous and stuff. If anything changed, we’d hear about it on the news.”

She’d seen the live broadcasts on Berdly’s phone from the TV news crews parked outside the hospital. It all seemed like a waste of time to Susie. They weren’t gonna let the reporters inside to see Kris for themselves, and what was there to see *outside* the building? Maybe they were hoping to catch a glimpse of Noelle coming and going or something. It was stupid how much some people cared. People who didn’t even *know* them. If Susie was in the hospital, she would want to be left alone.

Of course, nobody would have given a shit if she was in the hospital, so that wouldn’t be a problem.

“I think if we haven’t heard from Noelle by the time school gets out, we should go over there,” Berdly proclaimed. “We may not be family, but we can visit Kris, too.”

“That’s a nice idea,” Martlet said. “I’m sure Noelle would be happy to see us! Would you like to come too, Susie?”

“Um.” Susie stared at her, frozen in that awkward space of having no idea what to say. Martlet knew that she and Noelle weren’t like……friends, right? Noelle probably wouldn’t be happy to see *her*.

Before she could answer, Alphys waddled up to their table, dressed in the oversized white lab coat she always wore when teaching this class, her tail dragging on the floor behind her. “Um, I’m glad to see y-you three all getting along, b-but you should probably focus on the assignment? Uh, you don’t have much time left to complete it…”

“S-Sorry Ms. Alphys!” Martlet apologized immediately. What a little teacher’s pet. “We’ll get to work right away!” She nudged Susie gently with her wing and whispered, “Think about it, okay?”

“Uh, sure…” Susie mumbled. “So, teach, what are we doing with this stuff anyways? I wasn’t paying attention.” She picked up one of the bottles of chemicals on the table and examined it with a toothy grin. “Hey, here’s an experiment for you. What do you think would happen if I drank this?”

“N-NO!” Alphys shouted, practically snatching the bottle away from her. “S-Susie, that’s hydrochloric acid! It’s, er, n-not edible.”

“Ehhhh, they say that about a lot of things.”

“No, r-really,” Alphys said, sounding stressed. “Please be careful with that.”

“Okay, okay, sheesh. Whatever.”

Susie rolled her eyes as Alphys shuffled off, muttering something about years until retirement under her breath.

“You, um, weren’t actually going to drink acid, were you, Susie?” Martlet asked.

“Nah,” Susie grinned. “Just wanted to make her sweat a little. Come on, who would just drink random chemicals like that? I’m not an *idiot.”*

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Alphys was sweating buckets by the time the bell rang. Hopefully no one had noticed - but then, why would they? It’s not like being nervous and jumpy was unusual behavior for her.

Today was different though. Today she had a decision to make. Though if she was being honest with herself, she had already made it. This part was just about working up the nerve.

She watched as Susie, Berdly and Martlet left the classroom together. It was nice to see Susie Thompson not being a bully for a change. Alphys wouldn’t have seen that friend group coming, but then, she supposed they did all have one thing in common: all of them gravitated around Kris and Noelle. Being a hero was a good way to make friends, and it seemed like the friends of heroes stuck together.

When everyone was out, Alphys closed and locked the door to the lab and withdrew the vial she’d been keeping in her pocket all day. The liquid inside almost seemed to glow under the fluorescent lights, a garish green color.

It would be nice, she thought, to be popular like that. To have people care about you, to bring them together even in your absence. That wasn’t the main reason for being a hero, of course. But it would be nice…

****

Berdly was chattering away again as they left the school, joining the rush of students flooding out the front entrance and into the cold outdoors. Already the sun was starting to get low in the sky, and it was still snowing. Susie tried not to shiver in her old threadbare jacket, which was warm enough most of the time, but struggled to keep up with these freezing mid-winter days. What was it now, February? Couple more months of cold weather to get through. She really hated winter…

“So!” Martlet chirped. “We’ve got plenty of afternoon left if we still want to go to the hospital and check up on everyone! Do you want to come with us, Susie? It would be the perfect chance for you and Noelle to make up!”

Susie blinked dumbly. “Uh, what? I’m not gonna make out with Noelle.”

Berdly cackled, but Martlet just looked confused. “What? No, I said make *up.* You know, bury the hatchet?”

Ohhh. Right. That made more sense.

Berdly was doubled over laughing now. Susie glared at him. “I’ll bury the hatchet in bird-boy here if he doesn’t stop laughing at me.”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” Berdly wheezed, wiping a tear from his eye. “It’s just…” He composed himself with some effort and said, “Susie, are you perhaps familiar with the concept of the Freudian slip?”

“I don’t know what the *$#@ you’re talking about.”

“You can explain it to her later,” Martlet said quickly. “Hospital time now?”

Susie heaved a resigned sigh and rolled her eyes. “Yeah, sure, whatever. I’ll tag along.” It beat bumming around the city on her own in this weather, or going back to the church where she had nothing to do.

“Yay! Come on, I know which train we can take to get over there.”

But they hadn’t even made it down the steps and to the curb before Berdly stopped them all short. “Wait! I forgot something!”

“Huh?” Martlet said. “What is it?”

“I left my chemistry textbook back in Alphys’ classroom!” He looked legitimately panicked.

“Dude, what’s the big deal?” Susie said. “It’s just a book, who cares? You can get it later.”

“It’s the weekend, I need it for homework!” Berdly squawked indignantly. “I’ll just be a moment! If I hurry I can get it before Alphys locks up the classroom!”

Susie opened her mouth to protest, but he was already running back up the stairs to the front doors. “And, okay, there he goes.” She turned back to Martlet and grinned. “Wanna ditch that nerd and get out of here? He can catch the later train, that’ll show him.”

“What? No!” Martlet said. “That would be mean. We’ll just have to wait for him.”

“Fine, fine.” Susie leaned against the railing, watching the snow falling around her. A flake landed on her nose and she threw her head and huffed, steam from her nostrils blowing it away. Stupid Berdly, making her wait in the cold…

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Alphys had reached the moment of truth.

All the students had left the building, as far as she could tell; they always cleared out remarkably fast at the end of the day. The other teachers would be finishing the day's work and locking up their classrooms soon, but over here in the science wing with the labs, it was just her left at this time of day on a Friday. She could afford to linger.

She shouldn't have done this here, she knew that. But she couldn't do it anywhere else. At home she wouldn't have the same medical supplies if she accidentally poisoned herself, and at Gastcorp she was surrounded by lab assistants and rarely got a moment alone. So if she was going to roll the dice on this, it would have to be done here.

And there was no time like the present.

Her hands shook as she unstopped the vial. She was *pretty* sure that drinking this wouldn't kill her. Not 100% sure, but definitely at least 80-90%. Those may have seemed like not the best odds to risk your life on, but Alphys trusted her own work. People took MGH all the time and *usually* didn't die from it. Noelle's blood was non-toxic, obviously, and only mildly radioactive. And as for Determination…

Well, technically her experiments with Determination hadn't killed anyone, although that had been a cold comfort to the test subjects. But that had been a much higher dosage. Humans were able to contain Determination without it hurting them, so why not monsters, with the right chemical formulation? If this worked, it wouldn't just change her life. It would unlock a whole world of new possibilities for monsterkind.

She took a deep breath. Then another. Then a third.

And then she drank the serum. She drank it all in one gulp.

It tasted terrible. But she'd anticipated that; it wasn't like there were artificial sweeteners in the stuff. It wasn't some kind of energy drink or something - although, she thought with a grim laugh, that wouldn't be the worst branding for it. Boss Monster Energy, pure power in a can.

She waited for the rush of strength and power to fill her weak, pathetic body. She imagined the euphoric feeling that would surely be hitting her any moment like a tidal wave.

Instead she mostly just felt a strong urge to vomit.

The room suddenly began to spin. Her body felt hot, her muscles aching. Her heart began to beat fast, faster, *faster.*

Oh crap. She had poisoned herself, hadn't she?

She took a hasty step forwards, but her little legs gave out and she fell onto her side. Her muscles were spasming involuntarily. Something was happening to her body. She tried to call for help but her voice stuck in her throat.

That all-consuming ache had turned the corner into agony. She felt herself changing, but this wasn't right, this wasn't supposed to happen. Power wasn't supposed to hurt like this. She could feel her skin *stretching* and her bones *growing* and it *hurt,* it hurt so much she thought she would go mad.

An unexpected sound intruded, cutting through the pain. The sound of a knock on the classroom door and a nasally voice calling, "Ms. Alphys? Are you still there? It's Berdly. I think I left my textbook behind."

She made a noise that was like a strangled roar in the back of her throat.

A moment's pause, and then the voice returned, an uncertain quiver in its tone. "Ms. Alphys? Is everything alright in there?"

The boy outside the door. She could smell him. He smelled *good.*

A rumbling feeling ripped through her stomach, and she realized with the last horrified vestiges of her rational mind that she was hungry.

No, starving. *Ravenous.*

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Susie and Martlet waited in polite, if not entirely comfortable silence, shivering in the cold. Susie wasn't exactly good at small talk. It being just the two of them made her realize how much she'd been relying on Berdly to keep the conversation going.

Martlet checked the fancy gold watch on her wrist, twittering anxiously. "If he's quick, we can still make the train and not have to wait for the next one…"

"What's with the watch?" Susie blurted out. She almost winced after saying it, and disguised the expression by narrowing her eyes, which probably just made her look angry. Why did she always feel the need to say the first thing that popped into her head?

"Oh, this?" Martlet gave a nervous laugh, looking at her wristwatch. "What about it?"

"Looks expensive, that's all," Susie rumbled. "Your family rich like Noelle's or something?"

Susie noticed Martlet's eyes linger on her tattered old clothes and saw the look of comprehension flit across her face. She was familiar with that look, though normally it came accompanied with a side of disdain. Martlet had the decency to just look a bit embarrassed.

"Not really…" Martlet explained. "The watch was a gift from my grandfather."

"So it's just your granddad that's rich?"

"I mean, I wouldn't say he's rich exactly…" She seemed to be getting more and more uncomfortable, plucking at the feathers on her arm. "And he's kind of… estranged from the rest of my family."

"Oh. Huh." Susie couldn't really imagine what that was like, having a family big enough that you could just cut parts of it out and still function as a family. Her family had always been like those stands with three legs that you put cameras on: take away one leg and the whole thing fell down. "That sucks."

"He hasn't always been the best person," Martlet shrugged. "It does kind of suck, but…it is what it is."

"I get that," Susie told her. "Family can suck ass sometimes."

Martlet gave her a sympathetic look but said nothing, and Susie didn't elaborate. She'd only known the girl for like, two days after all. Gonna take more friendship points or whatever than that to unlock her tragic backstory.

She shivered, pulling her jacket tighter around her. "What the hell's taking him so long? Hey, can we at least go stand inside the building while we wait for birdbrain? If I get any colder I'm gonna fall asleep."

"Oh, I'm so sorry!" Martlet chirped, as if the cold was her fault or something. "I forgot you don't have any plumage or anything to keep you warm! I'm sure Berdly will be out any minute, but yeah, let's warm up inside."

Susie gratefully followed her back up the steps and pushed open the door. The walrus security guard at the entrance looked at them suspiciously. Susie glared back at him, daring him to say something, but Martlet said, "Hi, we're just checking on our friend who just came through here. Bluebird like me, did you see him?"

The guard shrugged and pointed down the hall before waving them through the metal detectors. "Went that way. Don't be long fetching him, you know you kids aren't supposed to hang around here all day, right?"

"Thanks, we'll be quick!"

They headed down the hall, towards the science wing. "It *is* a bit odd that he isn't back yet…" Martlet fretted.

Susie was just happy to be inside where it was warm. "Nah, it's not. He probably let Alphys trap him in a conversation about anime or some shit."

“Haha, yeah, that’s probably it.”

A distant crash sounded from around the corner. Susie held out an arm to stop Martlet. “Did you hear that?”

Martlet froze, looking nervous. “It…sounded like it came from the chem lab.”

Susie knew the sound of objects being knocked to the floor all too well. “Shit. Come on, someone’s in trouble!”

She took off running down the hall, skidding around the corner. She was ready for trouble, but all she saw was Berdly pounding his fist against the door to the chem lab. “Ms. Alphys, are you in there?! Say something!” He glanced up at the sound of Susie’s heavy footfalls. “Oh thank god. Susie! Something’s wrong!”

Martlet caught up to them, gliding down the hall on her wings before alighting on the ground next to Susie, breathing hard. “What’s going on?”

Just then, a blood-chilling roar came from behind the chem lab door, accompanied by more sounds of shattering glass. Susie took an instinctive step backwards.

Martlet yelped. “What was that?!”

“I think something’s attacking Ms. Alphys!” Berdly explained in a panic. “The door’s locked from the inside. Susie, can you help me get it open?”

“You, uh, sure that’s a good idea?” Susie said. She could hear snarling noises from behind the door, and she didn’t know what the #@($ was going on but she had a feeling it was nothing good. “I could run and get the security guard…”

“Susie, *please!”* Berdly squawked. “What if she’s hurt? There’s no time to waste!”

Okay, okay, $*#% it. She backed up and charged at the door, slamming her shoulder into it. It wasn’t a heavy-duty lock and she could feel the door frame crack as she hit it. She winced, rolled her shoulder, and tried again. This time it gave way and she stumbled inside.

And found herself face to face with a monster.

Not the normal kind of monster either, but a *monster* monster. The kind with yellow scales and long spines on its head and down its back, its jaws full of sharp teeth. It stood tall on double-jointed legs amidst the absolute wreck of the chem lab, beakers shattered and tables overturned, the polished floor gouged with gnarly claw marks. The creature had a savage look in its eyes, a long prehensile tail whipping from side to side. But bizarrely, across its bulging chest and muscular legs it wore a tattered white lab coat and a pair of stretched and torn purple pants.

Martlet screamed as she rushed into the room after Susie and saw the creature, and Berdly shouted, “Holy crap, WHAT IS THAT?”

Susie gulped. “I think that’s our chemistry teacher.”

The lizard monster leaned in towards them, sniffing the air with its elongated snout and emitting a rumbling sound from the back of its throat. Susie took a slow step back towards the door, trying to gesture with a subtle hand signal for the others to do the same. Maybe this thing wouldn’t attack if they didn’t make any sudden moves.

Only Martlet failed to get the hint. Instead she cautiously crept forwards, past Susie, to approach the terrifying clawed beast that had somehow replaced their teacher. “Ms. Alphys? What happened to you?”

“Don’t try and talk to it, dumbass!” Susie hissed, grabbing Martlet’s wing. “Get back here!”

“Martlet, no! What are you doing?!” Berdly shouted.

“It’s okay!” Martlet insisted. “She wouldn’t hurt us. She needs our help.” Susie watched in horror as Martlet held out her other wing towards the lizard, the way you might approach a feral dog, trying not to look threatening. “Alphys, it’s us. You *know* us.”

But Susie could see the hungry glint in the creature’s eyes, and she knew a predator preparing to strike when she saw one.

The lizard reared its head back, a sound building in the back of its throat, and ripped free a single roar of a word. “RRRRUUUNNNNN!”

Susie grabbed Martlet around the waist and yanked her backwards just as the monster that had been Alphys lunged forwards, snapping its jaws right where the bluebird’s head had been a second earlier. Martlet screamed and Susie lost her balance as the girl tried to scramble back in a panic, both of them falling backwards onto the floor.

The lizard advanced on them, looming over them with slavering jaws, spraying spit as it snarled. It was too late to get away, but with a surge of desperate terror, Susie rolled over to shield Martlet with her larger body. Maybe if the creature bit her first, it would be distracted long enough for Martlet and Berdly to escape.

But no bite came. Instead there was a shattering noise and an angry roar from above her. Shards of glass tinkled as they bounced across the floor around her head.

Susie looked up to see Berdly by the supply closet, holding a glass beaker in his shaking hand. “Get away from them, foul beast! I won’t let you eat my friends!”

He threw the second beaker. It shattered on the monster’s chest, but it was enough to get it to back up a pace. Susie wasted no time scrambling to her feet, pulling Martlet up with her.

“Go go go go GO!” she shouted to Berdly, grabbing his hand and dragging him out the door.

She hauled ass down the hall, the bluebirds taking to the air and gliding ahead of her, shouting for help. Susie heard a tearing sound and a bang and glanced over her shoulder to see what was left of the door torn off its hinges as the hulking lizard burst out of the classroom, skidding clumsily on the floor before giving chase in a terrifying four-legged sprint.

Susie ran faster, her heart pounding in her chest, her bruised ribs protesting painfully. $@*$ she was out of shape, she wasn't built for speed. Too slow and lumbering, not like other monsters. Not like the apex predator chasing her.

Fortunately she didn't have to run far. She rounded the corner leading back to the entrance just in time to nearly run headfirst into the security guard running up to see what the commotion was. She saw his eyes widen in fear when he spotted the thing chasing them. He had his gun already drawn. "Kids, stay back!"

"No!" Martlet tried to shout as the walrus planted his feet and raised the handgun. "You don't understand, it's -"

But he wasn't about to stop and listen. Susie ducked her head instinctively, still sprinting for the exit, as the shots rang out behind her. Three of them, then a scream.

Then the guard's flabby body went flying through the air over her head. He slammed into the wall above the door and fell to the floor with a heavy thud. Martlet and Berdly screamed, shrill voices crying out in unison.

"Go, keep moving! Follow me!" Susie shouted as she charged through the metal detectors and slammed the doors wide open with her shoulder, stumbling through into the cold outside air. Berdly and Martlet flapped through the open door and took to the air, out of reach, but Susie kept running. She didn't stop to look back; if she had to wonder how close behind death was, that meant she wasn't dead yet, and that was $*#@ing good enough for her.

She felt the air shift behind her, heard Berdly scream, "Look out!" and on instinct, she dove and hugged the ground just in time to see a huge shape leap through the air and pass over her, claws extended. Instead of pouncing on her it hit the stairs leading down to the street and rolled, tumbling head over tail down the steps.

Susie sat up, breathing heavily, glancing around for a place to hide. But the creature didn't turn around and pursue her again. Instead it got to its feet, wobbling, and Susie noticed a trail of bright red spots of blood leading down the stairs. The lizard pressed a hand to its side, an oddly humanoid gesture, and she saw that it was bleeding. The guard must have gotten a lucky shot in, hit a soft spot among the scales.

It turned its head and looked at Susie, locking eyes with her, and for a long second or two Susie froze with her heart in her mouth. But then it roared and turned and ran out into the street. Susie saw a truck almost hit it, the driver screeching to a halt and honking the horn while pedestrians screamed. But the creature wasn't interested in them. Instead it ripped a manhole cover loose from

the middle of the street, taking a chunk of concrete with it, and with a surprisingly fluid motion, slid into the hole head-first and disappeared.

Susie let out an exhausted breath and slumped her back against the railing at the top of the stairs. It was still snowing, but she didn't even feel the cold anymore, not with adrenaline pumping through her body.

*What. The F*&$. WAS THAT ABOUT.*

Martlet flapped down and alighted on the ground next to her, huffing and puffing from exertion. Berdly was right behind her. "Is everyone…okay…?" he squawked, his voice cracking from the stress, the words coming out in bursts. He sounded like he was about to hyperventilate, and Susie couldn't blame him.

"Never better," she wheezed, giving him a shaky thumbs up. Holy crap she felt alive. Terrified, but so god damn alive.

Martlet buried her face in Berdly's feathers, crying as he wrapped his wings around her in a tight hug. "I don't understand!" she wailed. "What *was* that? What happened to Ms. Alphys?"

"Martlet!" Berdly gasped. "Do you! Want! To go to the dance with me!"

Martlet pulled back from the embrace, momentarily shocked out of her crying. "What?"

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry!" Berdly gasped. "We just almost died! And I've been wanting to ask you! But it's hard and scary but - but…we almost DIED and I just wanted to know if youmaybewouldliketogoonadatewithme?!" His voice rose in a panicked crescendo, cracking on the last word.

Martlet stared at him, dumbfounded. And then she laughed. A badly-contained snicker escaping her beak that quickly grew into a manic giggle.

Berdly looked crestfallen, and also like he might be about to have a panic attack. "I'm sorry! I'm being stupid again, please, forget I said anything!"

"No no no! I'm sorry!" Martlet giggled. "It's just funny…"

Susie watched the scene unfold while she caught her breath, her mouth hanging open in confusion. What the hell was happening right now? These idiots must have lost their dumb minds.

"Berdly," Martlet said, stifling her giggle fit. "Do you know what makes a Sadie Hawkman dance different from a regular school dance?"

"Ummm…" Berdly said. "Is it the paper mache hawk mask?"

Martlet's laugh was like a trill of birdsong on a spring day. "No, silly. That part's just a weird tradition."

Berdly looked confused and a little panicked still. "Then what?"

“For a Sadie Hawkman dance,” Martlet explained, “the girls are supposed to ask their dates out, not the other way around. And I’ve…” She blushed, her collar feathers puffing out. “I’ve been trying to decide how to ask *you.”*

Berdly’s expression looked so stupid that Susie couldn’t help but burst out laughing. “HAW! Birdbrain got the gender roles backwards! Dummy!”

“Shut up, Susie!” Berdly screeched. “You - you have no room to talk! You're a terrible girl!”

“Damn straight,” Susie smirked. Whatever that meant. “Wait. This dumb dance makes no sense. What about people like Kris? Would Noelle ask them first or would they ask her?”

“Oh my god, Kris!” Martlet chirped. “We were going to go see them! I completely forgot!”

“They already got almost killed, they can wait,” Susie said. “We’re lucky we didn’t join them in the next hospital room over.” Or worse, that room where they kept the dead people, what was it called?

She heaved herself to her feet. “So, are we gonna do anything about the rampaging monster that just got unleashed on the city or are we gonna stand around asking each other out?”

“I am *certainly* not asking *you* out,” Berdly huffed. “You can go to the dance by yourself!”

“Okay, deep breath,” Martlet said, which was kinda rich from someone who had been freaking out 5 minutes ago, but hey, that was all of them. Susie was still shaking a bit herself. “Susie is right, we have bigger priorities right now. Alphys escaped into the sewers. What are we going to do?”

*“We’re* not going to do anything,” Susie said. “Not by ourselves. I’ve almost been ripped to shreds enough for one day, thanks.” She pinched the bridge of her forehead and muttered, “I can’t believe I’m saying this, but… I think we’re gonna need some help with this one. And since you two just *happen* to have a superhero on speed-dial…”

“R-Right!” Berdly said. “Noelle will know what to do.” He fished around in his pocket and pulled out some kind of earbud, inserting it in his ear. “I really hope she picks up this time…”

Susie could hear the sounds of sirens drawing nearer. Someone must have already called the police. Her first instinct was to flee the scene; she really didn’t want to end up in a holding cell waiting for her dad to come and retrieve her sorry ass again. But she forced herself to stay put. She hadn’t actually done anything wrong this time - she was the victim here! Berdly and Martlet could back her up on that.

Besides, it would be worth some awkward questions from the cops to see the look on Noelle’s face when she realized that Susie had saved her friends’ lives.

She’d be able to milk this one for ages. Maybe Susie would finally get an apology.

Maybe Spider-Doe would finally look at her with some goddamn respect.

# Chapter 13: Bird Without Feet

“Let me get this straight,” Noelle said. “You want me to drop everything and go chase a big lizard monster through the sewers?”

“Well, duh,” Susie told her. “That’s your job, isn’t it?”

“My job,” Noelle repeated flatly, pressing her knuckles against her temple like she was trying to rub a headache away. Spider-Doe had arrived on the scene while the police were taking statements from Berdly and Martlet, leaving Susie to awkwardly relay what had happened. She looked tired; her green and red costume was rumpled and sweat-stained, like she hadn’t changed out of it in days, and when she’d taken off her mask she’d revealed eyes with dark circles underneath them and hair that was more frazzled than Susie had ever seen on her.

“Let me tell you about my job,” Noelle said. “I haven’t slept since Tuesday night, unless you count time spent unconscious after being poisoned. Kris still hasn’t woken up, and I’ve spent all night and all day trying to track down a killer. I’ve gone to half the shady bars and criminal hangouts in the city to crack skulls until I find someone who knows where Raven is. And now I think I’ve finally got a lead on where his hideout might be. So don’t lecture me on doing my job, because it’s literally *all* I’ve been doing.”

“Our teacher turned into a *monster,”* Susie insisted. “The dangerous kind! That other stuff can wait.”

“No, it can’t,” Noelle said. “If this lizard, or whatever it was, escaped into the sewers, then it could have gone anywhere in the city by now. I’m closing the net on Raven. I can’t afford any distractions.”

*“Distractions?* What if someone gets hurt?” Susie couldn’t believe this. Maybe rampaging monsters were just another Friday to Noelle, but from where she was standing the situation was kinda serious.

“Who’s it going to hurt in the sewers, Susie?” Noelle said dismissively.

“I don’t know, sewer workers? She already hurt Mr. What’s-his-name. Security guard guy.” She gestured towards the ambulance where the blubbery walrus monster was being loaded up on a stretcher, awake but moaning in pain.

Noelle looked unmoved. “He’ll live. Kris might not.”

“Some goddamn superhero you are,” Susie growled. “Bloodthirsty monster on the loose and you won’t even do anything about it?”

“I’ll get to Alphys, or whatever this thing you saw is, but I can’t do everything at once. I have to prioritize. You said it was injured, right? It probably ran away to lick its wounds for a while.”

“That’s right!” Susie exclaimed. “She took a bullet, which means she might be dying, *and* there’s a fresh blood trail to follow. So if you’re gonna go find her, this kinda seems like the best time to do that!”

Noelle turned her back on her. “If you want to go crawl through the sewer, be my guest. I have bigger priorities.”

Susie let out a frustrated snarl. “Oh so now that you actually need something done, *now* you’re okay with ‘ordinary’ people like me putting myself in danger. Back in the church, you said you cared about protecting people. Doing the hard stuff to keep people safe. Or was that just another lie you tell yourself to feel special?”

Noelle whirled around and took an angry step towards her, snowflakes swirling in her wake. “$#*& off, Susie,” she snapped, and Susie was so startled to hear her swear that her anger almost stopped dead in its tracks. “In case you haven’t noticed, there’s only one of me now. I have an entire city to look after, and I can’t do everything at once. The only reason I came down here when Berdly called was to make sure no one was hurt.”

Susie took a step closer, getting up in Noelle’s grill with her fists clenched. “And where were you when your bluebird buddies were nearly turned into monster food? Maybe I should tell Berdly and Martlet how much of a *priority* their safety is to you, you self-centered, cowardly little -”

Noelle slapped her. *Hard.* The impact gave her whiplash as her neck snapped to the side, and Susie stumbled and staggered away, nearly tripping over her feet but managing to stay upright. She shook herself, wincing as she worked her jaw. God *damn.* She knew Noelle was supposed to be strong and stuff, but the slender doe hit even harder than her dad - and that hadn’t even been a proper punch.

“I am so sick of taking shit from you!” Noelle was shouting. “I’ve never done anything to you and all you do is bully and insult me. I thought maybe you could get better, but I’m over trying to help you. The next toxic remark out of your mouth is getting rammed back down your throat!”

Susie heard shouting. She turned her head to see Martlet and Berdly breaking off from their conversation with the police to stare at them in shock, but she didn’t care. Noelle wanted a fight? Fine. She’d been itching to take the rich b!&# down a peg for months now.

With a roar of anger welling up from inside her, she charged Noelle head-first. Noelle dodged to the side of course, with that freakish ability of hers to see attacks coming, and tried to shoot a net of webbing at her. But Susie had seen that coming too and lurched out of the way just in time, ducking her head. Instead of getting tangled up in the sticky ropes, she grabbed hold of the web line and yanked on it as hard as she could, sending Noelle stumbling off-balance towards her.

Susie seized Noelle’s wrist, her large palm wrapping around the web-spitting gadget Noelle wore there. “No webs!” she snarled. “Fight fair for once!”

She *squeezed,* feeling the delicate machinery beginning to crunch under the pressure of her grip. Noelle shrieked and lashed out with her hoof, kicking Susie's leg right out from under her, sending her down to one knee. Noelle punched her in the head and stars erupted behind Susie's eyes. She let go of Noelle's wrist, collapsing to the cold, snow-coated ground. Distantly she heard screaming.

But Susie knew how to roll with a punch and she wasn't going to go down that easy. She kicked up with her leg and her foot connected with Noelle's stomach, knocking the wind out of her with a heavy *oof!* Susie rolled over and pounced while Noelle was stunned, dragging her to the ground.

They grappled frantically, Noelle trying to lash out and push her off, Susie pinning the doe with her superior weight, trying to hold her hands down to avoid taking any more super-strong punches. Noelle yanked her arm out of Susie's grip and tried to pull at her long mane of hair, and Susie grimaced and snapped her teeth at Noelle's arm, forcing her to let go or else get bitten.

"Get off me!" Noelle screamed, thrashing so much Susie could barely hold her down. "Let me go! I hate you!"

Then Berdly and Martlet were suddenly by their side, trying to pull Susie off, though the light little birds with their wimpy wings couldn't do much to move her. Everyone was shouting - Noelle screaming at her, the bluebirds shouting at both of them to stop.

Susie was hit out of the blue with a scene from a long-forgotten memory, one of many she had tried hard to stuff deep down where she would never have to think about it: A memory of herself, small and young and vulnerable, whimpering as she huddled in the kitchen corner, her face smarting painfully, her parents' voices screaming at each other as she hid her head behind her arms.

The fight drained out of her and she went limp, releasing her grip on Noelle and letting Berdly drag her off the deer. Noelle scrambled to her hooves, breathing heavily, a freaked-out look in her eyes and a busted webbing device sparking on her left wrist. Susie thought she might try and attack again, but Martlet got between the two of them, wings spread. "EVERYBODY STOP IT!"

Something was happening to Noelle. Susie watched in confusion as something black and liquidlike spread over her costume - even over her unmasked head, forming a new mask with bright white 'eyes' like teardrops with jagged edges.

Berdly gasped from behind Susie's back. "The Nega-Noelle! I knew it!"

"Get away from her, Berdly," Noelle said. Her voice sounded different somehow; muffled by the mask, probably, but there was an odd echo to it. "She's dangerous."

*"I'm* dangerous?" Susie huffed. Her jaw ached and her head was throbbing where Noelle had hit her. "You're the one who started it, you freak!"

Noelle took an angry step forwards, but Martlet held her back. “Noelle, what’s gotten into you?” She gestured up and down at the shiny black costume that had materialized out of nowhere. “What is this?”

“Just…just leave us alone!” Noelle shouted, and then she turned around, jumped away, and shot a web into the sky, awkwardly swinging one-handed off into the distance.

Susie was still sitting there numb and dazed on the cold concrete when she felt rough hands haul her to her feet and pull her arms behind her back. Handcuffs snapped around her wrists, and she heard the characteristically hostile voice of a cop growl, “You’re under arrest for assault. You have the right to remain silent. You have the right to…”

The rest trailed off into verbal mush, in one ear and out the other. Susie couldn’t bring herself to care. She’d tried to help, tried to do the right thing, but who was she kidding? It was always going to end this way. The so-called ‘heroes’ looked out for themselves while Susie was left to rot in a jail cell before being shipped off back to her own personal hell.

Berdly and Martlet were making a fuss, shouting at the cop to let her go, saying it wasn’t her fault. The pig wasn’t having it. “You are interfering with an arrest! You kids better back off or I’ll put you in a cell right next to hers. Don’t test me!”

“It’s okay,” Susie told them, her voice flat and quiet. “Just do as he says. It’s not worth it.”

She let the cop march her to his car and shove her in the back seat. She didn’t look back at Berdly and Martlet. She didn’t want to see the look on the faces of her would-be friends.

*They’ll be better off without you,* she told herself. *Everyone always is.*

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“You sure do get around, kid.” That was the first thing Undyne said when she walked up to the holding cell where they’d thrown Susie.

She had been here for…a few hours now? It was hard to say, because they hadn’t done the prisoners the courtesy of hanging a clock on the wall in here, and because Susie had been kinda in a fog the whole time. Mentally checked out, staring at the wall like a death’s row inmate on their execution date, waiting for the inevitable. She might have fallen asleep if she hadn’t been so hungry, but her stomach kept growling.

But now Undyne was here to rub it in her face. Hooray, she was saved.

“I want a lawyer or whatever,” Susie grumbled. She wasn’t an idiot. She would mouth off at Undyne all night long if her only crime was being caught sleeping in

a church, but an assault charge was no joke. Not that she had much reason to fight for her freedom. Maybe prison would be the best thing for her at this point…

"Yeah, that won't be necessary," Undyne told her. The police chief produced a key from a ring of them on her hip and unlocked the cell door. "You're free to go."

"What?" Susie blinked up at her warily, suspecting a trap. "Already?"

"Noelle Holiday and her mother decided not to press charges," Undyne explained. "Although let me tell you, Carol really wanted to. I guess Noelle talked her out of it or something. Maybe the kid doesn't hate your guts as much as you seem to hate hers."

Susie stood up slowly; she was still sore in all the spots Noelle's thrashing limbs had hit her. "Yeah, right. Probably just didn't want to get sued. She's the one who hit me first, you know. I was just defending myself."

"Yeah, lucky for you we got witness statements to that effect."

"Wait," Susie paused, more out of curiosity than anything else. "Can I do that? Sue Noelle?"

"Kid, do I look like your lawyer?" Undyne said in an exasperated tone. "I'm not sure who provoked who, but hey, kids fight sometimes…even ones with superpowers who should know better. No one got seriously injured, so we can chalk this up to a case of hormonal tempers and poor judgement and let you walk. Just don't go getting into any more fights, okay?"

But Susie hesitated. "You heard how this all started, right? Giant rampaging lizard monster that appears to be our science teacher?"

"Yeah, we got your friends' statements about that before you and Spider-Doe decided to start beating on each other, remember?"

"So are the police going to, you know, do anything about it?" Susie asked. Sure would be nice if this could become someone else's problem, but she knew how useless the cops usually were.

"We're looking into it," Undyne told her.

"What does that mean?"

"It means you don't have to worry about it anymore." Undyne gestured out of the cell like a bellhop holding the door for her. "You coming or not?"

Tentatively, Susie walked out of the cell and past Undyne, letting the cop walk her out. This felt too good to be true. "You're not going to tell my dad?"

"Oh, we called him," Undyne said. "Had to. Protocol, remember? But you'll never guess what he said."

Susie had a bad feeling that she could guess. “What?”

Undyne put on an impression of a gruff male voice. “He said, “So what’cha bothering me for? I’m done bailing her out. Do your jobs and lock her up already, jail’s where she belongs.” Charming man. I always thought he seemed so *nice.”* She stopped just outside the door to the public-facing front office of the station and looked at Susie. “You got somewhere to sleep tonight, kid?”

Susie snorted. “If you care that much, you could let me sleep here.”

“Ha!” Undyne barked. “Fair point. But I wouldn’t want to keep you from your friends.” She opened the door and pushed Susie through.

“My friends? What are you talking a-” Susie cut off as she saw Martlet and Berdly huddled in chairs in the waiting area by the front desk. Berdly was on his phone, Martlet having fallen asleep next to him, her head slumped on his shoulder.

Berdly nudged her awake when he saw Susie coming. “Susie! I see the enforcers of the law have deigned to be lenient with you. I must confess, I was none too certain that they would! It’s wonderful to see you restored to your proper state of liberty!”

Martlet, blinking drowsy sleep out of her eyes, kept her greeting shorter. “You’re here!” she squealed. “We were worried about you!”

Susie blinked at them stupidly, trying to understand what their presence implied. “Were you…waiting for me? This whole time?”

“Of course!” Martlet said with a bubbly chirp. “I knew they couldn’t hold you for long! Not after we called Noelle and talked her down. She, um, didn’t answer our calls at first… she was pretty upset. But once we got through to her we were able to convince her that you, um, you really were just trying to help.”

“But…but…” Susie stammered. She could feel herself starting to tear up, which was so stupid it made her mad. Could you believe these beautiful idiots, sticking up for her for literally no good reason? Braindead birds. “You two should be at home, or like, with Kris in the hospital or something, not wasting your time on me.”

“You don’t think we would leave a comrade held captive, do you?” Berdly proclaimed. “Not when we know you were only defending yourself from an aggressive assault on your person!” He paused and added, “I’m sorry about Noelle, by the way. I think…she might not be entirely herself.”

Susie scoffed, wiping at her eye and blinking; something must have gotten stuck in there. “You mean she’s being even more useless than usual?”

“ALL RIGHT, THAT’S ENOUGH WEEPY REUNIONS,” Undyne yelled from the front desk. “GET OUTTA MY STATION BEFORE I ARREST ALL YOU KIDS FOR BEING SAPPY!”

They hurried out of the station and onto the cold street. It was long past sundown but still snowing, flurries of white against the dark sky and the patchwork of lights that was the city. Susie hunched down under her coat. What a goddamn day…

Guess it was time to head back to the church and lick her wounds. Or maybe… maybe she could stick with these two dorks for a while longer? That might be nice, if they would have her.

"So," Susie said as they walked down the street, "our teacher transformed herself into a feral beast and went wild, your so-called hero friend isn't gonna help, and I'm pretty sure we can't count on the cops either. What are we going to do about this mess?"

"Well," Berdly said, "the way I see it, we have two options." He held up a finger. "Option one: We mind our own business, count ourselves lucky to be alive, and go home to wait and watch how it turns out on the news."

"What's option two?" Martlet asked.

"Option two: We take matters into our own hands, be the heroes we want to see in the world, and solve the problems that this city's supposed protectors are too busy for. Which would, of course, be insane and possibly suicidal."

"Starting to think that's the definition of heroism," Susie said with a toothy grin.

"Guys," Martlet said, stopping in the middle of the sidewalk. They turned to look at her. She had a steely look in her eye that Susie hadn't seen there before. The look of someone about to make a momentous and probably reckless decision. "I don't know about you, but after seeing how Noelle behaved today…I'm feeling ready to do something heroic. Somebody has to."

"Uh, did you miss the part where we almost died and got arrested, though?" Susie asked. "I'm just saying…do we really like Alphys *that* much?"

"It's not just about Alphys, Susie," Martlet explained. "It's about keeping her from hurting anyone else." She clutched her wing and looked down. "Enough people have been hurt recently."

"Okay, just for the sake of argument, let's say we decide to go with option two," Berdly said. "Do we have a plan? I would feel a lot more comfortable if there was a plan."

"I don't know if it's a *plan,* exactly," Martlet said, fiddling with the gold watch on her wrist, "but I do have an idea." She raised her head to look at them. "You guys up for a quick field trip? There's something I want to show you."

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Martlet didn't say much on the way there - wherever there was - and Susie was too tired to ask. They had followed her onto the subway, taking the train on a route Susie had never been before, but Martlet seemed to know where she was taking them, and it was hard for Susie to worry about getting lost when she didn't have much of anywhere else to go. Wouldn't have been her first night spent randomly wandering the city.

Berdly was more inquisitive, asking questions every few minutes while Susie nodded off in her seat on the subway car, but Martlet seemed determined to keep him in suspense. "It'll be easier to explain when we get there," she told him. "You trust me, right?"

For Susie it wasn't about trust; she was just glad to have someone else around. She could doze on the subway knowing no one would mess with her, and that her friends would wake her when they got wherever they were going. It felt…nice. Comforting, in a weird way, to be able to let her guard down a little. It made her realize how exhausted she was all the time.

So she let herself catch some shuteye for a few minutes, and sure enough, she woke to Martlet gently nudging her shoulder. "Uh, Susie? Wake up, we're almost to our stop."

"Huh? I'm awake," Susie mumbled, rubbing her eyes. "Yeah…"

She drowsily followed Martlet and Berdly onto the subway platform and upstairs, until they emerged again into the fresh, cold evening air. It had finally stopped snowing, at least for now.

Susie didn't recognize the neighborhood - it was more industrial, warehouses and factories and shit. Seemed like a sketchy place for a trio of teenagers to be wandering around after dark, but Susie wasn't scared. She'd survived a mutant lizard attack and a tangle with Spider-Doe; she could take on a mugger or two if she had to.

"Martlet," Berdly said, sounding a little exasperated, "this had better be worth dragging us halfway across the city for."

"It will be!" She waved for them to follow her down the street. "It's not much farther, come on!"

Martlet led them around the corner to a storage facility - one of those outdoor ones that was just a bunch of long rows of units the size of a small garage, each one marked with a number and an identical padlocked door. The uniformity of it all made Susie's head spin; it felt like the world's most half-assed maze. She had no idea how anyone was supposed to remember which door had their stuff behind it. Aside from the numbers and shit.

But again, Martlet obviously knew what she was looking for. They stopped in front of unit #63, and Martlet dug out a key and unlocked the padlock. She strained to lift the steel door. "Susie, would you mind, um, giving me a hand with this?" she panted. "These things are so heavy…"

“Bet it’s not even that heavy,” Susie grinned, “and you just have noodle arms.” Finally, something her skill set of ‘able to lift heavy things’ was good for. She had been waiting to see why these nerds kept her around.

She waved Martlet aside and crouched down to lift the door from the bottom. It wasn’t even hard to lift, just tall. She’d opened peanut butter cans that gave her more resistance than this thing.

“Ha!” she said. “See? Bet it’s those gender pills making you weak. Remind me never to take those things. Unless they taste good? What do girl pills taste like anyways…?”

“They taste like hopes and dreams!” Martlet said with a sugary-sweet smile.

“Maybe you should reconsider, Susie,” Berdly said sarcastically. “Perhaps a little less testosterone would do you good.”

Susie followed them into the dark storage locker, grumbling half-heartedly while Martlet groped around for the lightswitch. “Hey, I think I have just the right number of test- test toaster - thing you said! Maybe *you’re* the one who should be - woah.”

Martlet had finally found the switch, and as the bulb hanging overhead flickered to life, Susie was stopped in her tracks.

Some kind of costume was suspended from the ceiling on wires: a suit with *wings,* huge ones, easily three times the length of Martlet and Berdly’s wingspans. The suit had an almost military look to it, thick leather covered in straps and buckles, like something a fighter jet pilot might wear. But the wings were made of metal, painted green, with big propeller turbines in the middle and razor-sharp edges like splayed feathers made from swords.

And mounted on a stand nearby was a second, smaller costume. This one was sleeker, more form-fitting leather with a steel breastplate, feathery blue wings, a big collar of puffy blue plumage and a curved yellow visor.

“Holy crap,” Berdly said. “I recognize this flight suit! It belongs to the villain called -”

“The Condor,” Martlet said. She was staring up at the winged super-suit, her back turned to them. “That’s what they called him.” She turned around, hugging her chest in an anxious way, less a dramatic reveal than an embarrassed confession. “But I always knew him as granddad.”

Berdly stared at her like his eyes might pop out of his head. “You’re the granddaughter of a supervillain?!”

“Please don’t hold it against me! I didn’t even know he was a criminal until recently. I think my parents suspected, but they didn’t want to acknowledge it, you know? Granddad did a lot to support the family financially. They just didn’t want to look too closely at where his money came from.”

“The Condor wasn’t exactly subtle about his criminal activity, Martlet,” Berdly said. “Remember when he and Hippo attacked the armored car convoy on the Monsterhatten Bridge last year? I personally assisted Spider-Human in foiling that robbery!”

“I know,” Martlet said. She was pacing nervously back and forth in front of the hanging costume, from one wingtip to the other and back again. “He attacked the mayoral debate at the university, too. He’s in prison right now because Noelle stopped him.”

“And you’re friends with her and Kris anyways?” Berdly questioned.

Martlet looked down at her boots sadly. “I know he wasn’t the best person. He hurt people. He was a thief and a criminal. I can’t blame Noelle for intervening. She was just trying to keep people safe from him.”

“Seems simple enough to me,” Susie said. She was examining the rest of the stuff in the storage locker; there weren’t just costumes in here, but also racks of what looked like weaponry, ranging from strange high-tech guns to metal gauntlets with sharp talons. “Your granddad’s an asshole, now he’s out of your life. If it were me, I’d be happy he got put away too.”

“But that’s the thing, he *wasn’t* an asshole,” Martlet said. “Not to me, anyways. He always loved me. He called me his “little starling.” And when I came out, he was the only one who supported me instantly. My parents didn’t understand at first. They took a lot of time to adjust, so when I told granddad, I wasn’t sure how he would take it. But he just shrugged and said, “You’ll always be my little starling, no matter what.””

“That’s all very heartwarming,” Berdly complained, “but it doesn’t explain why you have his stuff. Or why you brought us here to show it to us.”

Susie snorted. “Thought you were supposed to be the smart one.”

“What does that mean?” Berdly said indignantly.

“It means she didn’t bring you here just to impress you, dude.”

Martlet blushed. “I-I’m getting to that! So, after granddad got arrested and I finally found out who the Condor really was, he sent me a letter from prison. In it he confessed everything. He told me he had only ever lied to protect me, that he was sorry he wouldn’t be there to help me anymore. That he wanted to stop, to get out of the game, but the Kingpin had leverage on him. They even threatened me, apparently!

“But the letter contained something else. He couldn’t say it outright because the contents of inmates’ letters are monitored, but he left little clues, references that felt out of place. There’s a framed photo of me as a kid and granddad that I had hanging on my bedroom wall, and the letter led me to check behind it. I found this key taped to the back. He must have left it there the last time he visited.” She held up the key she had used to unlock the storage locker, complete with a tag with the address on it.

“He left another note in here, pinned to that blue suit. He wanted me to have these things if I ever needed them, in case Kingpin’s men ever made good on their threats and I ended up in danger. In his note he said he had been planning to train me on how to use them, but I guess he had a feeling he might not get the chance. With the life he was leading, it was always possible something could go wrong. So he left contingencies in place.” She spread her wings wide, a miniature shadow of the massive suit behind her. “And now all this is my inheritance. The legacy of a super-criminal.”

“Awesome,” Susie grinned. Martlet’s grandfather didn’t sound half bad, actually. At least he cared about her. Susie’s own father hardly bothered to feed her, but Martlet’s granddad had given her *weapons.* That was proper parenting in Susie’s book.

“No, not awesome!” Berdly squawked. “Is it even legal to own all this stuff?”

“Dude, who cares? It’s sick as hell.” Susie took down a weapon from a rack on the wall, a large curved axe with a blade made from shiny green steel, molded in the shape of a wing of sharp feathers similar to the wings of the Condor suit.

It was surprisingly light. She gave the axe a test swing and the blade started to glow green, the handle humming with vibration under her hands. “Woah, it lights up! This guy thought of everything!”

“Please be careful with that!” Martlet yelped. “It’s a kinetic energy weapon! The more you swing it, the more it charges, until eventually you can throw shockwaves at your target.”

“So you *do* know how all this stuff works,” Susie said. She was tempted to try out the shockwave thing, but it would probably be a bad idea to start shooting off energy blasts inside this place. “Seems kinda bulky to be a flying guy’s weapon, though.”

“Granddad may have left me some instruction manuals…” Martlet admitted. “He was a talented engineer when he wasn’t robbing banks. That axe actually folds up for portability. I think he was innovating new combat tools for, um, fighting Spider-Human…” She cleared her throat and pointed at the weapon. “Uh, see the button on the side of the handle there?”

Susie pressed it and sure enough, the ‘feathers’ of the blade quickly folded down into the handle, like a folding pocket knife on a much larger scale. She pressed it again and they snapped right back out, ready for action. “Ahahaha, oh hell yeah. I call dibs on this one.”

“Call dibs on it for *what?”* Berdly demanded.

“Berdly, remember what you said about, um, taking matters into our own hands?” Martlet said. “I was just thinking, if I have all this equipment…maybe I could do some good with it.”

Berdly blinked at her stupidly for a moment. Then Susie saw the moment it clicked in his head, and he threw up his wings in disbelief. “No! No way, nope,

absolutely not. You can't be serious!"

"What's the big deal, dude?" Susie said. "Half your friends have special powers and cool tech. Why not us too?"

"Because it's insane! And way too dangerous! Martlet, I can't let you do something so reckless."

Martlet walked right over to him and put her hands on his shoulders. "Berdly," she said seriously. "You said you wanted me to go to the dance with you, right?"

"Um…yes?"

She stared directly into his eyes. "Which means you're serious about wanting to give this - *us* - a chance?"

"Y-Yes! I mean, if that's what you want…"

"Then I just have one condition."

".....what is it?"

"You don't ever get to tell me what I can and can't do. Can you agree to that?"

Berdly looked like he was sweating, though it was difficult to tell under the feathers. "Yes," he chirped quietly. "Whatever you say, my lady!"

"Good!" Martlet said, releasing him with a sheepish smile. "That's a relief, gosh. I, uh, really didn't want to get into a fight with you before we even started dating!"

"Hahaha!" Susie chortled. "Haven't even been on a date yet and she's already got you totally whipped, dude!"

"Shut up!" Berdly squawked, flapping his wings so fast he sent feathers flying. "I don't even know why we had to bring you! Martlet, why is she here?"

"Because she's our friend, Berdly!" Martlet said reproachfully.

"Nah, it's because you two are idiots," Susie grinned. *Why else would they be friends with you?* "And someone needs to be around to keep you dummies from getting yourselves hurt. So it's a good thing you've got me." She hefted her badass new axe and thrust the handle point-down on the ground beside her, striking a cool pose. "Enough yappin' already. Gear up and get your wings on, nerds. We've got a lizard to hunt."

# Chapter 14: Raven's Last Hunt

Noelle perched in the branches of a tree, a dark shape among the nighttime shadows, feeling like a predatory animal stalking her prey. There was a certain appropriate thrill to that feeling. After all, she was here to hunt a hunter.

Below her lay the former site of the old Middle Park Zoo, a big complex of buildings and outdoor animal habitats surrounding a central courtyard. The zoo's aging infrastructure had been abandoned some months back, the animals all moved to a newer, more modern facility on the other end of the park, but the city hadn't yet done anything with the old space, only fenced it off and left it to gather dust.

In retrospect, this should have been the first place she looked for someone like Raven. Themed villains tended to be predictable like that. Yet it had taken her all day and a bit of dumb luck to track his location. She'd gotten a tip from a rat monster at a shady dive bar who had been blabbing to his petty criminal friends, saying Electron had been in there the other night claiming he'd met a weird bird guy in the old zoo who had offered him a job. The rat had been eager to spill his guts to her, too, once she'd broken his front teeth with her fist. Not the nicest way of extracting information, but effective. And she couldn't afford to waste time playing nice.

**We did what we had to,** her friend told her. And indeed, it had done most of the dirty work. There were some things Noelle was happy to hand over control of her body for. **It worked, though! We make a good team!**

"Let's not celebrate just yet," Noelle whispered. "There's a chance he might not be here anymore."

**He's here. I may have lost his trail earlier, but I can smell him all over this place.**

Noelle swung down from above, landing stealthily in a crouch atop the rock formation in the courtyard's central pool. Used to be a sea lion exhibit, if she remembered correctly from her trips here as a kid. Now it was just a lonely rock, with no animals in sight. The pool was still full of water though; even with all the courtyard's lights shut off, she could see its dark surface shimmering, reflecting the light of the stars in the sky, empty save for a log or inflatable toy or something floating by the glass perimeter. Guess they hadn't bothered to drain the water when they left this place behind.

"Any idea where to look first?" It wasn't the largest zoo, but Raven could be hiding out in any corner of it, and she didn't want to alert him to her presence by wasting time rummaging around in all the wrong places.

**I think we should start -**

The thought was cut off by the alarm of Noelle's spider-sense flaring, the Other responding to the sensation second-hand. Their shared mind reacted more slowly than normal, Noelle's body moving only after both their minds had processed the situation. A mere second's difference, but sometimes that was all the difference that mattered. Before she could sense which direction the danger was coming from and move to avoid it, a bolas of steel cord and heavy iron balls shot out of the shadows and wrapped itself around Noelle's legs.

It would seem Raven had found her first.

Thrown off balance, Noelle fell backwards off the rock fixture. She hit the water with a splash, too surprised to remember to take a breath first. The dark water closed over her head, and she felt herself sink into the deep.

Then she hit the bottom a couple seconds later, because it wasn't really that deep of a pool. Ten feet, maybe? Deep enough to swim in, but Noelle was a strong swimmer and shouldn't have had any fear of drowning.

Only right now she had a bolas wrapped around her legs and weighing her down, keeping her stuck to the bottom as surely as a cinderblock tied to her ankle. She tried to paddle with her arms, forcing herself upwards, but even with her strength, the extra weight made it impossible to rise. The only air she had in her lungs was what she'd been able to suck in from the space between her face and mask, and already that meager mouthful was running out. She thrashed around under the water in a panic, lungs burning, trying to find the iron weights in the dark and crush them between her hands so she could escape.

The Other in her mind was bafflingly calm; though it must have been able to pick up on her panic, it reflected none of it back to her. **Why are you scared, Noelle-Host?**

*I'm drowning!!* Noelle thought back, her thoughts all sharp and focused and jumpy, like jagged lines on a seismograph.

**What is drowning?**

*Oh my Angel.* It didn't even understand the concept. *I can't breathe! I need air!*

**Ah, oxygen. Why didn't you say so?**

Her "mask" pressed in against her face as she gasped for breath, and she almost choked at the feeling of something slipping down into her throat. But instead of an obstruction blocking her airway and choking her faster, it was a strange but unobtrusive sensation, liquidlike enough that it didn't fill her throat so much as coat it like honey. And suddenly she could breathe again, oxygen flooding her lungs instead of the water she had feared.

Noelle gasped. *What did you do?*

**My form stores oxygen which I can share with you, and water will not penetrate it. You do not need to be afraid of the water while you are wearing me.**

*That's amazing!* Noelle thought. And kinda invasive and gross; it took everything in her not to gag at the feeling of the Other inside her body. But then again, it had kind of already been inside her, living beneath her skin, and this trick was definitely better than suffocating.

She turned her focus to untangling herself from the bolas. But it turned out that her unlikely partner could help her there, as well. Sensing her frustration at the steel coils binding her, it expanded its form around her legs, pushing her "costume" outwards and forcing the flexible steel cords to expend what little slack they possessed to stay taut around it - but when it shrank back down like a balloon losing its air, the cables were left slightly looser. Just loose enough for Noelle to wiggle free.

*Thanks!* she thought. *You're getting cleverer at this stuff.*

**I am learning many new things about the physical world, Noelle-Host, thanks to you.**

Noelle was about to kick off the bottom and swim back up when her spider-sense flared back to life again. She spun around, squinting through the eye of her mask to see through the murky darkness of the water, ready for anything.

**Something is coming towards us.**

She wasn't ready for the vast black shape, moving rapidly through the water, jaws open. *A crocodile?! I thought there were no animals left in this place!*

Noelle screamed and tried to throw herself backwards, but the water slowed her, making her evasive movements a pathetic echo of her normal reflexes. The animal was on top of her before she could get out of the way, mouth open for the kill.

She did the only thing she could do: she grabbed the creature's jaws in both hands and held them open, her arms like a wedge keeping rows of sharp teeth from snapping shut around her. The crocodile's strength was tremendous, pushing against her with all the force of a hydraulic press. If she hadn't had super-strength, it would probably have snapped her arms like twigs and bitten her in half.

But she had more than just her strength - she had the Other's strength as well. Together they were mightier than any animal, and not only did Noelle hold the crocodile's jaws open, she began to bend them backwards. The animal started thrashing its body and tail, churning water in the sudden panic of a predator becoming prey.

**Do not fear. This sharp-toothed thing will not eat us.**

*Don't hurt it!* she thought, and at the Other's wave of confusion, added, *It's only acting on instinct. It's defending its territory, or maybe it's just hungry. It doesn't know any better.*

**I understand. This creature is like me before I learned how to be like you.**

*That's right. Please, can you just…get it out of the way without harming it?*

**Of course!** the Other said, and before Noelle knew what was happening there were *tentacles* growing out of the blackness of her suit, tendrils that wrapped themselves around the crocodile, tying its jaws shut. Then the tentacles lifted the animal bodily out of the water and tossed it aside before retracting back into Noelle.

Noelle floated there for a moment, stunned. *I didn't know you…we could do that.*

**I told you, we can do lots of things together! Useful, no?**

Noelle had to try this for herself. She held her arms out, visualizing what she wanted to do, and dark tendrils shot out from her hands, grabbing the lip of the glass fence above the water and pulling her up and out.

She overestimated the force and shot out of the water like a bullet. On instinct she thrust her hands down, sending dark appendages like webbing down to stick on the ground, arresting her momentum. Then she retracted them back into her arms, pulling her body down to the ground. She landed in a crouch, her enhanced muscles absorbing the shock of the hard impact. She caught a glimpse of the escaped crocodile slipping into the bushes, beating a retreat.

The Other retracted its form out of her throat, letting her breathe unaided again, and Noelle straightened up, water glistening on her shiny, oily black form. "RAVEN!" she bellowed. "I know you're here! Stop playing games and face me!"

A voice echoed through the bushes, bouncing off the walls. He was throwing his voice somehow, making it hard to tell where the sound originated from. "A wise hunter never confronts a target head-on if he does not first understand all that it is capable of. And your capabilities seem to be growing by the day, Spider-Doe."

"You want to know what I can do?" Noelle challenged, slowly turning in a circle, trying to predict where he might jump out from. "Come out and I'll show you."

"Yes," Raven agreed, "you will. I've been expecting this visit, and have prepared a few playmates for you. You passed your first test. Now come, venture deeper into my jungle and we shall see who is the greater predator."

A flare burst to life somewhere beyond the treeline, deeper into the zoo. Red light and a rising column of smoke to guide the way. In the distance, an ominous drumbeat began to play.

Noelle hesitated, uneasy. *This is the most unsubtle trap I've ever seen…*

**The Raven Man is a fool! Whatever he has planned will be no match for us. Imagine how glorious the fear in his eyes will be when he realizes he set a trap for a deer and caught a tiger.**

Noelle smiled. The Other's optimistic confidence was contagious. *All right. Let's go make him regret this little stunt.*

She wasn't going to just follow the footpath, though. That way was probably laden with booby traps. Instead she swung on a webline up onto the roof of the nearest building, and from there jumped from tree branch to tree branch, heading in the direction of the flare.

She found the source of the smoke in the Grasslands area, in an enclosure made to look like the dusty, jagged yellow rock formations of the great plains. The rock walls were cast in an eerie, flickering red glow from the flare, which sat atop a raised mound, seemingly abandoned.

Noelle was losing her patience with these games. She swung down into the enclosure, looking up at the rocks and the viewing areas above her and behind glass on the ground level, but there was no sign of Raven. "I'm here! Stop wasting my time and fight me already, you coward!"

"Perhaps I shall," his voice echoed down from somewhere in the rocky landscape. Noelle thought she saw a flash of movement and swiftly fired a web at it, but the shape had already vanished. "But first, it is feeding time, and my beauties are hungry. Let's see if you're enough of a morsel to sate them."

A grinding noise from behind her made Noelle spin around. There was a door in the wall of the enclosure, built to look like just another part of the fake terrain. But it was sliding open now, and from within Noelle saw the glint of eyes glowing in the red light of the flare, and heard a savage snarl.

**Oh! It's a kitty!**

*Not the nice kind,* Noelle thought, her muscles tense. *Brace yourself.*

With a yowl, not one but *two* lean and hungry-looking leopards charged out of their pen and into the enclosure. Noelle ducked as the first one pounced at her, letting it pass harmlessly over her head. The second paced more cautiously, circling her while the first regained its balance behind her and began to circle her from the other side.

**Was letting yourself be surrounded intentional?**

*Shush, I'm improvising.*

Impatience got the best of the creatures' caution, and one of them lunged at her again. Noelle nimbly side-stepped and tagged it with a webline, using its momentum to swing and then throw it right into the face of its companion as the second leopard pounced at her. The big cats crashed into each other and rolled onto the ground, a snarling tangle of claws and fangs.

"Come on!" Noelle shouted at them as they picked themselves up, angry but more wary of her now. Noelle could feel her own blood getting hotter, the thrill of the fight mixing with her frustration at having to waste time on these appetizers. "Let's give your master a good show!"

This time they attacked her together, one leaping high for her face, claws out, while the other tried to tackle her legs. Noelle vaulted over the lower one, raising her legs out of reach and shoving it into the ground with her hand on its head. At

the same time, she slammed a hand up palm first into the chest of the second beast, forcing it away from her. Its claws flailed blindly, catching her on the arm, but instead of sinking deep into her flesh, her symbiotic suit hardened like cement and trapped its paw.

Noelle fell hard onto her back, the animal's weight throwing her off balance. She was pinned under the leopard, which seemed torn between trying to extricate its claw from her arm in puzzlement and trying to bite her face off. Her arm that it had its claws stuck in like tar was the only thing holding its snapping jaws away from the rest of her body.

*Let go of it!* she thought frantically. *I need to get it off me!*

While her Other responded to her command, flowing back into a soft liquid and allowing the leopard to free itself, Noelle used her other hand to hastily web the second leopard to the ground before it could come after her again. It couldn't attack her if its paws were stuck together.

Then she punched the leopard on top of her in the side of the head. As much as she didn't want to abuse any animals, she was feeling pretty abused herself right now, and it was time to take the kid gloves off.

The leopard yelped and rolled off her, shaking its stunned head. Noelle didn't give it time to recover. She leapt on top of it and straddled its body, wrapping her arm around its neck in a chokehold while it clawed at the dirt and growled. Noelle yelled back, letting out an angry scream of her own.

**It tried to hurt you. Kill it.**

The creature's neck was thick and muscular, but she was stronger. She squeezed it tighter, forcing its head back, and its snarl cut off in a choked whine. She was panting, her heart pounding in her chest like an unrelenting drumbeat, her mouth twisted into a grimace as she strained.

She was a ~~hero~~ **predator.** She was strong. She would ~~stop~~ **kill** anything that tried to hurt her.

**Break its neck.**

A tingle from her spider-sense dimly broke through the black fog of her violent focus, and a second later a spear arced down from the sky and embedded itself in the ground a few feet away. A spear with a little electronic box strapped to it, just like before.

Noelle braced herself for that ear-splitting pain again, but her Other was one step ahead of her. Without waiting for her to ask, it sent a mass of tentacles flowing forwards, crushing the box and snapping the spear in half before throwing aside the pieces.

Raven swooped down from a nearby pillar of rock and alighted on the ground facing her. ***Finally. Our prey shows his face.***

Noelle stood, releasing the leopard from her chokehold. It ran whimpering for its enclosure, its tail between its legs. Its companion, still struggling with paws stuck to the ground, howled for it to come back, but Noelle, without taking her eyes off Raven, raised her web-shooter and spun a net over it, making sure it was secure.

“You’re going to have to do better than that to stop us,” Noelle challenged. “You don’t get to pull the same trick twice. I’ll give you credit, though - as cowardly as it is to make animals do your fighting for you, at least that part was novel.”

“I would not have let you slay my pets,” Raven told her. He was unarmed save for a wooden shield and a knife, but Noelle knew better than to assume he didn’t have more tricks up his sleeve.

“You should be less worried about what I could have done to them and more worried about what we’re going to do to you.” The sight of him made Noelle’s blood boil. This preening jungle psychopath was the reason Kris was comatose in a hospital bed right now. He’d been menacing her and her loved ones for long enough. It was time to put an end to his threat.

“You’ve changed since I first set my sights on you,” Raven said. “Grown more savage.” He shifted into a fighting stance, daring her to attack. “It’s always interesting, seeing how the prey adapts to the hunt. But you…you’re something special. It will be an honor to take your li- guh!”

Noelle had closed the gap between them with a swift leap and kicked him in the chest. Raven went tumbling head over talons from the force of the blow, but steadied himself with a flap of his wings to break his momentum, finding his feet with an outraged expression on his face.

“Enough talk,” Noelle spat at him, narrowing the slits of her costume’s white eyes. **“Let’s hunt.”**

Raven swooped at her, flapping his wings and slashing with his knife, but Noelle was ready. She ducked back, avoiding the blade, and caught his wing in her hand. With a swing of her arm she pulled Raven out of the air and slammed him into the ground. He grunted, stunned, but with his enhanced strength he wouldn’t be down for long. Not unless she made sure he stayed that way.

Noelle had him by the wrist, and though he tried to pull free, she held fast, squeezing him with a grip that could crush concrete and bending his arm back. He tried to kick at her with his feet, but his legs were short and she knew now to steer clear of his talons. A quick spray of webbing pinned his feet to the ground and mitigated the risk of poison.

Raven screeched in fury as she squeezed his wrist. She could feel his bones under her fingers, and she knew that with just a little more pressure, they would crack like brittle twigs.

*He has strong muscles but fragile bones,* she thought, and another thought came bubbling up in reply. **We can break him.**

“Drop the knife!” Noelle demanded. “Drop it or I break your arm!”

But Raven wasn't the type to yield. Instead he only cawed out a laugh and raised his shield in front of his head. Noelle's spider-sense tingled, and in that moment of focused clarity she noticed, a little too late, that the shield had small vents on it.

There was a hiss and some kind of green-colored smoke poured out of the vents in a rush, filling the air around her face. *Gas!* she thought in a moment of panic.

And then she felt viscous semi-solid matter sealing itself over her mouth and filling her nostrils, and she almost laughed. *Thanks!*

**I did not let you breathe the water, dear Noelle-Host. I will protect you from the poison air as well.**

Raven was holding his breath, but there was confusion in his eyes at her lack of reaction to the gas. Noelle smiled.

And then she broke his arm.

It was easy. All it took was a little leverage on each side and a quick, firm push. A clean break, right in the middle of the wing. Raven screamed, finally dropping the knife, and immediately began coughing and choking on his own gas.

Noelle dragged him away from the cloud of fumes - as satisfying as it was to see him get a taste of his own medicine, she didn't want him dead or disabled. She wanted him **broken.**

She slammed him against the rock wall. "Was that the best you can do? We're disappointed."

"My wing," Raven gasped. "You *broke my wing!"*

**"We're going to do a lot more than that."** The voice was hers, but the words were not.

She threw him to the ground. He tried to crawl away, leaving a trail in the dust, but his broken wing and webbed-up feet kept him from getting very far. He'd barely gone a few feet before Noelle was on top of him, rolling him over and straddling him, her fist pulled back.

"This is for Kris," she said coldly, and slammed her fist down towards his face.

Raven raised his shield just in time to protect himself, but a wooden shield was nothing against the strength of her rage. Her first punch splintered it. Her second cracked it in two. Tentacle limbs erupted from her chest, seizing the broken pieces of the shield and hurling them away, before pinning Raven's wings to the ground, leaving her hands free to hit him.

The red light from the flare had begun to sputter and die out, and in that waning bloody glow, Raven was finally looking at her with the expression she had been craving: fear. "What - what *are* you?"

Noelle leaned down close to his face, close enough to see the ghostly black and white visage of her mask reflected in Raven's wide, black eyes. "We…are **Vengeance."**

The first time she had ever punched Raven in the face, she had barely even stunned him, his artificially enhanced endurance more than a match for her own strength. This time, though, her strength was doubled, and there was purpose behind her punch. She wasn't merely trying to save herself from an attacker. She was going to make sure no one ever dared attack her again.

She felt his beak crack under her fist.

Raven screamed. The second punch cut that down to a choking, spluttering cough. After the third, he stopped making any noise at all. He stopped moving, too.

But Noelle didn't stop hitting him. Not for a long time.

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Chief Undyne left the police station feeling bleary-eyed and tired. It had been another late night, burning the midnight oil, but if she'd wanted a quiet job with short hours, she'd be the police chief of some tiny town out in the sticks somewhere instead of monsterkind's biggest urban center. This city never #*$&ing slept, and so neither did she some nights.

Didn't help how much of a shitshow things had been lately. Seemed like the whole city's criminal element had been emboldened by the attack on the Spiders. They knew that Spider-Human, at least, wouldn't be coming after them for a while. And with Spider-Doe having apparently gone rogue, chasing down that hunter nutcase, Undyne's officers had been spread thin. Mayor Holiday was breathing down Undyne's neck expecting results, Carol's daughter was running around getting into fights with her classmates, and then there was that East Monsterhatten High schoolteacher who had transformed herself into a feral monster or something.

This city. Maybe a transfer out to some rural burg wouldn't be the worst thing after all. Certainly would be a lot less stressful…

Undyne pressed the button on her car keys and her cruiser in the parking lot beeped, lights flashing. Her thoughts had already turned toward home, skipping over the drive to anticipate a hot shower and her nice warm bed…

Something fell from the sky and onto the hood of her car, denting the metal and cracking the windshield. Undyne jumped back in shock, her startled curse drowned out by the blaring wail of the car alarm.

It was a monster. A bird, wings splayed and crooked, feathers torn out, face swollen and bloody.

Undyne drew her sidearm, looking up and scanning her surroundings. She just caught a glimpse of a dark shape leaping off the roof of the police station and swinging away into the night on a thick black rope. Undyne knew that silhouette and who it belonged to, but something about it felt different this time. More menacing.

She cautiously approached the injured monster on the hood of her car. She recognized him from the police reports Noelle had given - he was wearing the same leopard-print pants with a belt of animal teeth, the same fur-fringed jacket. But those reports had made him sound dangerous, formidable. This monster looked beaten half to death, harmless and broken.

Undyne checked his neck for a pulse, her own heart thumping in her throat. If she'd just had a wanted man's corpse dropped in her lap then there would be a new manhunt in this city before daybreak.

But no. He was still alive, although his pulse was weak and his breathing labored.

Only then did she notice there was a note glued to his chest, webbing holding down the corners. It was brief, written in a jagged scrawl of bold letters. "DID YOUR JOB FOR YOU AGAIN. YOU'RE WELCOME."

Undyne hissed out a breath between her teeth and swapped out her gun for her radio. Looked like her night wasn't over just yet.

****

It had begun to rain, water melting the snow and turning the steel and glass spires of the city slick and slushy, running down the windows in heavy rivulets, pooling on ledges and rooftops, everything flowing inevitably downwards to the streets and gutters and storm drains. Noelle crouched on a stone outcropping on the side of a building, catching her breath. Letting the rain slide off her back as she slowly came down off the violent high of victory.

**You didn't kill him,** her Other said. It sounded confused. Maybe even a little disappointed.

*It's not right to kill people,* Noelle told it. *Even if they're evil.* She should probably have explained that earlier. She kept forgetting how little the entity she was working with understood, how many things were foreign concepts to it. It was like a child in some ways, having to be taught from scratch about morality. A very powerful, very dangerous child.

But god, the way it made her feel. She hadn't slept in days, hadn't eaten in…she couldn't remember how long, because she didn't feel hungry. She didn't feel tired. She felt invincible. She felt like she could keep going forever, beat every criminal in the city senseless one by one until the jails were overflowing and there was no more work left for her to do.

**I understand,** it said, though Noelle couldn't tell if that was really true or not. **Heroes don't kill evil.**

*That's important. Please don't forget.*

She let her head fall back, rain falling on her face, closing her eyes despite the fact that they were shielded. She couldn't really feel the rain, couldn't get wet underneath this slick symbiotic suit, but it felt nice just to let the rain caress her, washing her clean. Washing away the blood on her knuckles.

She felt unmoored, adrift. Like a boat torn away from its dock in a storm and carried out to sea. But it was only now, after it was over, that she felt that way. In the heat of the moment, when she'd been painting Raven's face red with her emotions, she hadn't felt lost at all. She'd felt a rare kind of purity. Like she hadn't felt since…since Chara…

**You wanted to.**

Noelle shook herself, trying to clear the blood-splatter cobwebs from her thoughts. *Hmm?*

**You said it's wrong to kill. But you wanted to kill him.**

*Yes,* she admitted. *I wanted to kill him.* She had stopped herself, this time, but…it had been a near thing. Noelle took a deep breath, let it out in a shaky flutter of an exhalation. *Maybe I'm more wrong than I realized.*

**You're not wrong. You are the Noelle-Host.**

*I don't understand. What do you mean?*

The Other flowed over her more rapidly, a sense of urgency in its mind. **I'm here because of you. You showed me how to live. You're everything to me. So I know you are not wrong, because being with you feels right.**

Noelle let out a small, nervous laugh. *That…doesn't sound like a very healthy basis for a relationship.*

**I do not know about relationships. I only know the Bond. We have a very strong Bond. I did not know it would feel like this.**

*Like what?*

**Powerful. A very great power.**

Noelle sighed. *Look at us. All strong and messed up.* She thought she would feel accomplished after defeating Raven, but all she felt was drained and sad. Beating him wouldn't make Kris better. It didn't feel like she had actually helped anyone.

**I do not know what is "messed up." But I know that you are strong, Noelle-Host. I am not the one who is making us strong. There is no us without you.**

Noelle stood, stretching, letting the rain drench her without ever breaching the surface of her living costume. She didn't feel like it was correct that it was drawing strength from her instead of the other way around. Her mind and heart felt tired, but her body felt energized. There was still an excited tremble to her hand when she recalled pummeling Raven's face with her fist. It scared her how much she had liked how that felt.

She should go home. Ignore her mother's questions, hug her sister, and force herself to try and sleep. Or she could go back to the hospital and check on Kris. Maybe, if she told them that Raven had been dealt with, somewhere in the depths of their slumber they would hear her, and feel a little safer.

But if she was being honest with herself, she knew they wouldn't understand.

And there was still work to be done. Still people who needed her. Susie, Berdly and Martlet had told her they'd been attacked by some kind of monster that had escaped into the sewers, and she had brushed them off because she'd been too busy hunting the devil she knew to deal with ones she didn't. Susie had called her a coward for it. But maybe it wasn't too late. Maybe she could still do some good.

Maybe there was still a chance to be a hero tonight.

# Chapter 15: The Ruins

The New Home City sewer system both wasn't and wasn't what Susie had expected. On the one hand, she had been expecting an enormous maze of dark, damp, smelly tunnels, and she had definitely gotten that. It was freezing down there, the sound of running water was constant, and even though they tried to keep to the drier walkways, there were times when it was impossible to avoid getting your feet wet wading through foul-smelling water. Susie had water in her boots and a stench in her nostrils that made her want to gag. The sewers were cramped, unpleasant, and disgusting.

They were also strangely beautiful.

Susie had paid attention in history class *some* of the time. Enough that it wasn't completely news to her that the modern monster metropolis that was New Home City had been built atop the foundations of the underground where monsterkind had once lived, centuries ago. They'd had their own cities back then, deep under the Earth, before they made their way to the surface and founded new cities there. It was kind of a long story, and she had forgotten most of it. There'd been that whole war with the humans after that, which had been a little more interesting at least, even if the textbooks had been disappointingly light on gory details.

The point was, she'd known that the ruins of the ancient monster cities still lay somewhere beneath the surface. But she hadn't ever expected to see them for herself.

As she and the bluebirds had ventured further underground, tracking the blood trail left by the monster Alphys had become, the tunnels had changed. Claustrophobic grey concrete corridors and industrial piping had given way to walls of purple-tinted bricks and wider tunnels with high ceilings. They passed through cisterns with tall brick arches and stone columns, the shapes throwing up eerie shadows in the light of their flashlights. At least it smelled a little less foul down here - though the ruins were old and moldy, crumbling and partially flooded, there was more stagnant standing water and less raw sewage.

Not that that stopped Berdly from flapping his beak about it. It had been nonstop whining the whole time. "Ugh, whatever you do, do *not* drink the water down here," he babbled. "I mean it, not one drop! It probably has bacteria that haven't been seen on the surface in a hundred years!"

"Chill, dude," Susie told him. "It's not like I was planning on sticking my face in the gross cave water."

"Bad enough we have to wade around in it," Berdly grumbled, although Susie wasn't sure what he had to complain about. He was wearing a high-tech bodysuit and she only had the one pair of boots. Plus, now that they'd made it into more open areas, there was actually enough space for the bluebirds to try out their new wings. Berdly had had some trouble getting used to his - the huge wingspan

wasn't very maneuverable, and he'd almost overdone it and crashed into a wall the first time he'd tried to fly - but Martlet was gliding just above them, light as a feather thanks to her costume's anti-gravity pack.

"I'm the only one stuck down here in the literal shit," Susie reminded him, pointing her axe threateningly at Berdly. "If you didn't want to get your feathers dirty then you didn't have to come with us."

"Guys, stop fighting!" Martlet chirped from over their heads. "I know it's gross down here, but it's too late to turn back now!"

"That's not entirely true," Berdly said. They were entering another tunnel, and he stopped briefly to draw an arrow pointing back the way they'd come on the wall in permanent marker. He'd been doing that the whole trip, leaving directions on walls as they walked. "I marked our route specifically so that turning back would remain a possibility."

"And I appreciate you making sure we don't get lost," Martlet said, "but come on! We can't give up or this will all have been for nothing!"

"I *would* kinda like there to have been a point to coming down here," Susie muttered. "You know, since I'm probably gonna smell like crap for the rest of my life now."

"It'll be worth it when we find Alphys," Martlet said, her voice filled with stubborn certainty. She was really taking this seriously, even though Susie still didn't see why this had to be their problem to solve. But hey, maybe if they saved their teacher, she'd be grateful enough to let Susie scrape by with a C instead of failing her class. This had to be worth some kind of extra credit, right?

"And what are we going to do when we find her, exactly?" Berdly griped as he noisily splashed his way through the water. "I don't want to end up as lizard food!"

"I told you, that's what this is for," Martlet said, holding up a weapon that looked like a futuristic nerf gun with a big circular chamber filled with darts. "Between this tranquilizer gun, the stun gauntlets in your suit, and Susie's sonic axe, we should be able to subdue Alphys without hurting her. Here, I made a list, see?" She pulled out a small notebook and flipped it open, reading off from the light attached to the side of her visor. "1. Retrieve Granddad's stuff (already did that…). 2. Track down Alphys in sewers. 3. Subdue Alphys. 4. Bring her to authorities who can lock her up until we find a way to change her back. 5. Noelle apologizes for being a jerk."

"Good luck with that last one," Susie snorted.

"You couldn't have kept track of that in your head?" Berdly said. "You had to write it down?"

"It's a lot to do!" Martlet trilled.

"At least we'll be prepared this time, thanks to this stuff," Susie said, giving her axe another casual swing and watching the way it began to glow with kinetic

energy. “Your granddad really liked his toys. He could have just used like, actual guns and stuff.”

“He always preferred nonlethal methods,” Martlet said. “He may have been a thief but he wasn’t a murderer.”

“Didn’t he drop Spider-Doe from like 3,000 feet in the air or something?” Berdly scoffed. “And I’m pretty sure he tried to kill Kris several times.”

“Well they’re still alive, aren’t they?” Martlet chirped indignantly. “I’m not defending his actions, I’m just saying, he never actually killed anyone. I mean, not that I know of…”

“Doesn’t matter,” Susie said firmly. “This isn’t about him. Your granddad may have been a bad person but that doesn’t mean you can’t be better than he was.”

“Th-thanks, Susie. You’re right, this isn’t about him, or even about us. This is about doing the right thing and helping Alphys, that’s all.”

“First we have to find her, though,” Susie pointed out. They’d already been wandering around down here for what felt like hours, and her stomach was rumbling. She didn’t want this to take all night.

After a couple more minutes of wandering down the tunnel, they reached an intersection, tunnels branching off on both the left and the right. While Berdly lingered behind to mark the way they’d come with another arrow, Susie and Martlet stopped to consider which path to follow.

“Any luck with that scanner?”

Martlet touched a hand to the side of the yellow visor covering her face, adjusting the settings. Turns out that thing wasn’t just for show. They’d lost the blood trail in the water a while back, but Martlet was still scanning for other signs of life. “Nothing on the infrared or x-ray scans.”

Susie glanced over her shoulder at where Berdly was scribbling overly-detailed directions on the wall, then lowered her voice to a rumble. “So, I gotta ask…why do you wanna go to the dance with that nerd? You didn't just say that to keep from hurting his feelings or something dumb like that, did you?”

“What?” Martlet whispered. She looked vaguely offended. “No, I really meant it!”

“But why birdbrain? I don't get it. You're like, actually really nice and cool and he’s…him.”

“He’s sweet,” Martlet said defensively. She glanced back at Berdly, who was drawing a crude map of the sewer system from memory, and added, “I don't know, we just clicked right away. Friends from the moment we met. And I could tell he was…interested, in maybe something more than that, but he wasn't weird about it at all. Normally I don't like that kind of attention from boys, because they're…”

“Stupid?” Susie offered. Boys were almost always stupid in her experience. Not that she had experience with like, flirting or whatever, but just in general.

“Because they either think I’m weird or they look at me like I’m some kind of novelty, like a new flavor of ice cream or something. Or they just don't notice, which is kind of flattering but also kind of worse because it's like ‘what will he do when he realizes,’ you know? But Berdly's not like that. He knows I’m trans but he doesn't care either way. He treats me the same as anyone else.”

“But he treats everyone else so bad,” Susie grumbled. “He's all ‘me me me,’ always bragging. It's so annoying.”

“He's just insecure, Susie.”

“What?” Susie blinked, uncomprehending. “No. Insecure is like, the opposite of that.”

“Not always,” Martlet said quietly. “Sometimes when you don't like yourself very much, you try extra hard to pretend that you do.” She gave Berdly another lingering glance. “I guess I want to give dating him a chance because he makes it easier to like myself. And maybe I can do the same for him. So he won't have to try so hard.” She paused for a few seconds, then shook herself and laughed her little birdsong laugh. “Besides, it's just a school dance. It's not like we're getting married or something.”

Susie elbowed her gently in the shoulder. “Well if you do, I call dibs on being best man or whatever. They have cake at weddings, right?”

“Hahaha! Yeah! They do have cake, that's true! Gosh when you put it like that it sounds tempting, doesn't it?”

Susie grinned and laughed as Berdly flapped over to them, demanding to know what was so funny. But before she could say anything, they were interrupted by a ticking sound from Martlet’s visor, and she held up a wing to shush them, suddenly intent.

“Got something?” Susie asked, leaning in closer.

“I’m picking something up on the digital geiger counter,” Martlet said. “It’s faint, but…” She turned her head to the left-hand passage. “It’s stronger in this direction. Guys…I don’t know what did this to her, but I think Alphys might be a little bit radioactive now.”

“That or there’s some other completely different radioactive mutant monster down here waiting to eat us,” Berdly said. “Uh, last chance to turn around? Anyone?”

Susie heaved a sigh and trudged off down the tunnel, shining her flashlight to light the way for the birds. “Guess we should go and find out.”

They were maybe a hundred feet down the tunnel when Susie’s flashlight beam fell on something startling on the wall: long scratches gouged into the brick, the

kind of marks that could only have been left by the enormous claws of some fearsome beast.

“Hey, check it out,” she whispered to the others. “That looks like our monster.”

“Why scratch up the walls like that?” Martlet wondered aloud. “It’s like she *wants* us to follow her trail.”

“Or m-maybe it’s sharpening its claws for the hunt!” Berdly stammered.

“Okay, don’t forget who’s hunting who here,” Susie said. “You’re not exactly helpless, Mr. Razor Sharp Wings.”

“All the s-same,” Berdly said, gesturing down the tunnel with one of said metal wings, “ladies first.”

Susie shared a glance with Martlet and rolled her eyes. “You hear that? He called me a lady.”

Martlet giggled. “Don’t be scared, Berdly! Us big strong ladies will protect you.”

“That’s not what I meant!” Berdly huffed. “You two just don’t understand chivalry.”

Susie grinned. “I don’t even know the meaning of the -”

She cut off as a low, rumbling roar echoed down the tunnel, causing the three of them to freeze in their tracks. Susie stood tense and alert, axe held at the ready, Berdly stepping nervously behind her.

“You two, stay behind me,” Susie whispered, inching her way towards the end of the tunnel ahead. “If anything attacks, fly back down that tunnel as fast as you can.”

“What about you?” Martlet warbled.

“Don’t worry about me,” Susie said. “I have experience fighting mean ugly lizards.”

She crept her way down the tunnel, to the end where the brick passage gave way to a huge open cave filled with tall stone columns and the crumbling edifices of ancient buildings. It was the biggest chamber they’d seen yet; Susie’s flashlight beam almost didn’t extend far enough to illuminate the cave walls and stalactite-covered ceiling high above. From somewhere ahead came the constant, steady roar of falling water.

And beneath that sound came a more animalistic roar, bouncing off the walls disorientingly - the sound sent a chill down Susie’s spine, the instinctive fear of a larger and fiercer animal.

But she had never let her fears hold her back before. “All right, going dark,” Susie whispered when the roar had subsided. She flicked her flashlight off, and the others did the same, plunging them into inky blackness.

But that didn't last long. Susie swapped out the flashlight in her jacket pocket with another one of Condor's gizmos they had borrowed, a helmet with an attached pair of night vision goggles. She strapped the helmet onto her head, grateful for the little bit of extra protection, and turned the goggles on. The outline of her environment lit up in a murky but legible green glow.

"Woah," Susie whispered, turning her head to look around. Her vision may have been constrained to a round fisheye lens, and it took some effort to distinguish shapes from one another amidst the grainy sea of green, but it was a big improvement from the limits of her flashlight beam. Berdly and Martlet had similar night vision in their suits, and Susie watched as they took to the air and flew quietly overhead, getting the bird's-eye view of the cave.

Then the two of them flew back down to where she was waiting; Berdly struggling to bring his bulky wingsuit to a smooth landing, while Martlet glided gracefully in a circle before alighting in the water next to Susie. "I saw something on the thermal scan," she said, pointing. "Over that way, by the waterfall."

"Okay, you two stay out of reach up above and give me air support. I'm going in."

"Why are you suddenly the one in charge?" Berdly whispered.

"Because I'm the one about to go square off with a mutant lizard," Susie snapped. "Got any better ideas, Nerdly?"

"No no, by all means," Berdly said sarcastically, pointing into the darkness. All Susie could see was a grainy mess in those shadowy depths, like an old TV, only awash in a single color. Even Berdly's normally bright blue feathers looked a sickly green. "If you're so eager to be monster bait, help yourself."

"It's not the worst plan," Martlet chimed in. "If we all attack at once, Alphys might run away again and then we'd be right back where we started. But maybe if she thinks it's just Susie, we can take her by surprise."

"You just be ready to swoop in when I call you," Susie said. "Those zappy fist things working, Berdly?"

He activated the brass knuckle-style accessories with a buzz and a crackle of current and bumped his fists together gently, sending off sparks.

"Nice," Susie grinned. "Glad you're on my side."

Berdly snorted. "And I'm glad you're being a little bit less of a bully for a change."

"Well, I might not have swiped your lunch as often if you'd had those things at school."

Martlet interrupted with a slightly concerned chirp. "Just…don't get your hands wet, okay, Berdly?"

“All right, enough standing around,” Susie said. “Let’s go get our teacher.”

The bluebirds took flight, and Susie began to wade through the water, following the sound of the waterfall deeper into the cavern. The water wasn’t that high in here, although the waterfall meant that it was flowing against her ankles in a steady push. It must have all been draining down the slight slope of the cave floor and into other tunnels and crevices. It was still enough to soak through her worn-down old boots, and Susie was beginning to think that if she made it out of this alive, she’d never complain about cold and hunger again as long as her feet were dry.

There was a row of stone pillars in the center of the cavern, and once she made it to them, the ground was raised a little and was merely slick with moss and puddles instead of entirely submerged. Susie found herself wondering what these ruins had once been as she stared up at the tall columns through the green-washed filter of her goggles, spotting her friends circling above like wild birds in the sky. Maybe it had been some kind of market or town square? Must have been weird, living underground. What did they all eat, cave moss?

The past had never felt very tangible to her, just dry, boring stories from dusty old books. It was the present that consumed most of Susie’s attention; the constant pressure to make sure her immediate needs were met. But standing in this place, in the literal shadows of history, Susie could feel a deeper connection to her ancestry. She wondered what kind of life she would have led if she’d been alive back then. Would things have been better for her? Or had there always been people like her, in every era of monster history, who slipped between the cracks, neglected and uncared for?

But then she heard a spine-chilling growl, and the sound of clawed feet splashing through water and scraping against stone, and the needs of the present rushed back in.

Susie began to spin her axe, charging it, the glow of kinetic energy lighting up the blade like a pale white flare in her night vision’s world of green. “Come on, come on,” she muttered. The sounds were coming closer, getting louder. Why did this thing have to take so long to charge?

A monstrous shape burst out of the gloom at the edge of her vision, barreling straight towards her. It had somehow gotten *bigger* since she’d last seen it, towering at least 12 feet tall, its spines elongated. A nightmarish creature of teeth and claws and a long flailing tail, a hundred times scarier in the emerald haze of the dark cavern than it had been under the fluorescent lights of the school.

“Gaah!” Susie screamed, and on instinct more than anything, slashed her axe down in an arc in front of her. It was glowing so bright now, vibrating hard enough to shake her whole arm.

She’d swung too soon to make contact with the creature charging her, but she didn’t need to. With a surge of energy, the swing of her axe sent a shockwave bursting out of it. It looked like a glowing crescent moon through her goggles, and she watched as it slammed into Alphys hard enough to lift the heavy-looking lizard straight off its feet and throw it backwards. It slammed against a pillar,

shaking loose dust and bits of stone and sending a heavy thudding sound echoing through the cavern.

“Martlet! Berdly!” Susie shouted. “NOW!”

The bluebirds swooped down out of the sky, screaming war cries. Berdly dive bombed the lizard as it was staggering to its feet, and delivered an exoskeleton-enhanced punch to the creature’s face. Susie saw the flash of his electrified fists lighting up the green static.

“Hiiiyah! Take that, foul beast!” He stumbled to a landing in front of the stunned monster, his metal wings spread wide.

“Berdly, move your wings!” Martlet cried, flitting around with wings flapping, her tranquilizer gun aimed at the creature. “I don’t have a clear shot!”

But Berdly was too caught up in the thrill of punching things to hear her. “Please stay down!” he yelled, hitting the lizard again with another electrified blow. “This is for your own good!”

Susie understood how therapeutic that sort of thing could feel, but this was too much for Berdly to take on alone. Even as she charged forward to help, the lizard recovered from the shock of the attack and snapped its jaws at Berdly. Its teeth clamped down on his wing - the metal one, not a flesh and blood one, thankfully - and with a steel-rending toss of its head, it threw Berdly aside and set him careening off through the air with a shrill scream.

“Berdly!” Martlet screamed behind her, but Susie didn’t stop to look back or to help Berdly. She was running as fast as she could, charging her axe with every lumbering step. Her mouth opened in a wordless snarl as the creature locked eyes with her and roared in defiance.

She leapt into the air, axe held above her head, and swung it down at the lizard’s head. She didn’t want to hurt Alphys, but it was her or them, and one way or another, she had to protect her friends.

But Alphys ducked her head at the last second. The axe cleaved through one of the spines on her head but got wedged halfway through one of the others down her neck. Alphys roared and thrashed, sending Susie flying, the axe handle slipping out of her grip. She hit the ground hard and rolled. Her helmet saved her from a skull fracture, but her night vision goggles ended up cracked and dented, and she twisted her leg as she fell.

Susie picked herself up off the ground, groaning. She scrambled backwards with a shout when she saw the lizard skittering towards her, its drooling mouth open to show off rows of teeth like spearheads.

But before it could reach her, Martlet swooped down and landed between them. “Stay away from her!”

She raised her tranquilizer gun and pulled the trigger. The chamber rotated as dart after dart spat out the barrel, each one loaded with enough drugs to knock out an elephant monster.

All of them bounced off the creature's scales and fell harmlessly to the ground.

"Oh shi-" Martlet cried, just as the lizard turned and lashed out with its tail, catching her square in the chest and knocking her off her feet. She flew off into the distance, landing somewhere in the water with a splash.

"Martlet!" Susie shouted, but it was too late to help her. The lizard had turned to face her again, a savage snarl building in its throat, and Susie was out of weapons and allies.

She ran, pain shooting through her ankle, stumbling in her haste to get away, the monster's heavy footfalls chasing after her. Susie zig-zagged off to the side just as the creature snapped its jaws shut behind her with a rush of air, its teeth barely failing to snag her jacket.

She ducked behind a pillar, breathing hard. She couldn't outrun this thing, not on a sprained leg. She just had to keep cover between her and it and hope she could distract it until her friends recovered. Or maybe it would lose interest in her and run off again, and then she could go get the others and get out of there. Maybe she could hide in one of the ruined buildings…

The lizard slammed into the pillar in its haste to get at her. Susie ducked her head and crouched low, flinching. There was a grinding sound like crumbling stone, and fragments of rock started to fall around her head.

*Oh $@*%!*

Susie looked up just in time to see the column of rock crack and start to come apart, heavy chunks near the top directly overhead beginning to slide out of place and fall towards her.

She should have run, should have willed her legs to move and scramble away. But instead she sat rooted to the spot, frozen in a primal panic. All she could think as death snapped at her heels and plummeted towards her head was, *I guess I can stop running now.*

And then something hit her from the side and knocked her to the ground. Susie faceplanted into the few inches of water covering the cave floor, and the shock of cold water on her face and in her open mouth snapped her back into focus. She sat up, spluttering. Chunks of stone hit the ground with a thunderous crash, sending water splashing all over her.

Berdly threw a metal wing over her, shielding her from the debris as bits of stone pelted them. The wing was torn and sparking, the metal rent by the lizard's teeth. "Susie! Are you injured?!"

Susie blinked up at him. "Berdly? You saved me?"

"I…did," Berdly said, looking just as shocked as she was. "Oh wow, I did! I'm a hero!"

"Don't let it go to your head," Susie muttered. "We're not safe yet."

She staggered to her feet and looked past Berdly as the dust settled. Her cracked night vision goggles had died on one side, but if she closed that eye and looked through the other one, she could still see.

And what she saw was a bestial shape crawling over the rubble of the downed pillar. It seemed unharmed, its tail thrashing from side to side. Her axe was still stuck in the spines on its back.

“Berdly!” Susie hissed, pointing at the lizard. “We need to get out of here, now!”

“What about Martlet?” Berdly said. “What happened to her?”

“She got knocked away. Somewhere over there, I think.” Susie pointed at the approximate spot she remembered Martlet falling, before looking back to the lizard. It was perched on the broken pillar, sniffing the air, but it didn’t appear to have spotted them in the dark yet.

“I’m going to buy us some time,” Berdly said, pulling a cylindrical object from a hook on his costume’s belt.

Susie grabbed his arm. “You can’t start throwing grenades around in here! You’ll bring the whole place down on our heads!”

“It’s just a flash grenade!” Berdly protested. “Listen, as soon as this goes off, we run and find Martlet. And then I suggest we beat a hasty retreat. Better to lick our wounds and live to fight another day than to get killed down here!”

Susie nodded. It was hard to argue with that. All her bravado and determination had evaporated. She hated to admit it, but she couldn’t win this fight. All she wanted now was to get everyone out in one piece.

Berdly popped the pin off his grenade and hurled it towards the lizard. “Close your eyes!” he warned Susie.

Susie shut her eyes tight, but the flash was still bright enough that she could see it through her eyelids, and the accompanying *BANG* echoed in her ears. The lizard let out a screech, and when Susie opened her eyes again, she could see it thrashing around blindly.

Berdly took off gliding over the surface of the water, his flight lopsided with one wing busted, looking for Martlet. Susie ran after him, throwing glances over her shoulder. Hopefully that monster would be stunned long enough that they could get away without being pursued.

She caught up to Berdly kneeling over a figure lying face up in the water. It wasn’t deep enough to drown in, thankfully, but Martlet wasn’t moving either. She just lay there, eyes shut, visor broken in two, exposing one side of her face. “Oh shit. Is she okay?”

“She’s still breathing,” Berdly said, his voice stressed and shaky. He tried to pull her up into a sitting position, one hand supporting her head. “Come on, Martlet, wake up!” He looked at Susie, panic in his eyes. “Why won’t she wake up?”

“Here, let me see her,” Susie said. She crouched down, carefully putting an arm around Martlet’s shoulders to support her. Then she slapped the girl hard across the face.

Berdly let out a shocked squawk, but it was drowned out by Martlet jerking awake with a gasp. She coughed, rubbing the side of her face. “Wh-wha…what happened?”

“Are you okay?” Berdly twittered. “Are you hurt?” He looked up at Susie reproachfully. “I can’t believe you hit her!”

“It worked, didn’t it?” Susie grunted. “Martlet, can you stand?”

“I - I’m okay,” Martlet said, though she trembled a little as Berdly helped her to her feet. She groaned and clutched at her chest, and Susie noticed that her suit was ripped and the antigrav pack on her back partially caved in. “I think my suit’s broken…”

“Doesn’t matter. We’ll make a run for it on foot.”

“What about Alphys?” Martlet asked. “We can’t just leave her here!”

An angry roar echoed through the cave, even louder than the waterfall. Martlet yelped, and Susie pushed her and Berdly towards the entrance leading back into the tunnels. “Yes, we can! Time to go!”

They splashed their way through the water, making a break for the tunnel. It was a cramped one, and Susie hoped it would be small enough that the lizard couldn’t follow them inside.

But first they had to make it there. She turned her head to look over her shoulder and saw Alphys running on all fours across the surface of the cave towards them, splashing water with every step.

“Come on, come on, come on!” Susie shouted. God, she wished she still had that axe. For a while there, with a weapon in her hand, she’d felt invincible. But now she just felt vulnerable and scared, like always. She was sick of always being backed into a corner, always struggling just to defend herself.

She wanted to turn and make a stand and fight, but she knew that would just get her killed. Maybe that was what being a hero meant: not triumphing over danger, but simply throwing yourself between it and other people like a shield. Even if you lost. Even if it took everything you had to save even one other person. At least then you’d die knowing you did something good with your life.

Susie glanced over her shoulder again. The monster was getting closer, closing the distance between them too fast, and the tunnel was still too far away, the bruised and battered bluebirds falling behind.

So Susie made a decision. She skidded to a halt, waving Martlet and Berdly on ahead of her. “Go! I’ll hold it off!”

“What?” Martlet said. “Susie, you can’t -”

“GO!” Susie hollered. She didn’t wait to see if they obeyed. Instead she turned to face the creature barreling towards her with its toothy jaws open in a snarl of rage, and she thought, *Come on, then. Come have a taste. I’ll poison you and make you choke on me.*

She braced herself, ready for it all to end. She’d go down swinging at least, just like her dad taught her. Blood on her fists and venom in her veins.

The lizard leapt at her, jaws open wide.

A dark shape swooped over Susie’s head and swung in a tight arc, slamming into the lizard and knocking it to its side, sending it crashing into a nearby rock. It fell to the ground and lay still.

“Oh my god,” Berdly shouted from behind her. “Spider-Doe!”

Noelle Holiday kicked off of the lizard’s body and flipped head over heels in the air before landing in a crouch in the shallow water. She turned to look at them, and in the glow of the night vision, the white eyes of her mask stood out even more vividly against the dark costume she was wearing. “Berdly? Martlet? Susie?? What are you all *doing* here?”

“I could ask you the same thing!” Susie protested. Part of her knew she should say thank you, that Noelle had probably just saved her life. But dammit, it didn’t feel great needing a so-called hero like Spider-Doe to pull her ass out of the fire. “How did you find us down here?”

“I wasn’t looking for *you,”* Spider-Doe said. “I was following the scent of - look, you shouldn’t be here!”

“Somebody had to do something, and you wouldn’t help!” Martlet trilled angrily.

“What are you *wearing?”* Noelle exclaimed. “Berdly? Is that the *Condor’s wingsuit?* Where did you *get* that?”

“It doesn’t matter! We found your monster for you,” Susie said, pointing to the stunned lizard. “Now do you believe us?”

“If I didn’t believe you, I wouldn’t be -” Noelle clenched her fists. “This was your idea, wasn’t it? Did you put them up to this? You could have gotten them killed!”

“Noelle, it’s not like that!” Martlet said.

Noelle turned to her, furious. “You know, I can see Berdly caving to peer pressure, but I expected better from you, Martlet. How could you go along with this?”

“It’s not her fault!” Berdly chirped.

“You think I wanted this?” Susie roared. “I’m the one who was trying to keep these idiots safe! All you do is ignore them! We’re only here because you suck at being a hero!”

Noelle stopped forwards, and her costume seemed to *ripple.* Little tendrils sprouted from her head and shoulders, thrashing wildly as though agitated. Susie took an instinctive step back. Suddenly she got a feeling, looking at Spider-Doe, that was almost exactly like what she'd felt seeing the lizard's jaws snapping at her face: an instinctive, animal thrum of fear.

"If you've got something to say to us, Susie," Noelle said, her voice low and threatening, her fists clenched, "then go ahead and say it."

Susie blinked, her throat dry. "Who's *us?"*

A low hiss rumbled across the chamber. The lizard was recovering, stumbling to its feet and swinging its head to face them, mouth open in a hateful snarl.

"Everyone behind me!" Spider-Doe shouted. "Berdly, get everyone to the tunnel and don't stop running no matter what Susie says!"

But the others didn't run. They stood transfixed, watching Spider-Doe swing into action. The way she moved, a dance of graceful fluidity and violent strength, was hard to look away from. She ducked and weaved, dodging snaps of the creature's teeth and leaping over swipes of its tail, in a way that made Susie and her friends' efforts look clumsy by comparison.

Susie watched as Noelle dodged a slash from the lizard's claws, then webbed its jaws shut. She practically launched herself off the ground, delivering an uppercut straight to the lizard's jaw that knocked some of its pointy teeth out. Then she flipped through the air and landed on its back. Tendrils somehow sprouted from her body like thick ropes of webbing, seizing the lizard's arms and holding them taut, outstretched to its sides. The monster thrashed and writhed around, but Spider-Doe held it fast.

Susie glanced at Berdly. "Uhh, what the #*$@? Could she always do that? That freaky tentacle thing?"

Berdly was staring at Noelle, his beak open. "No…no, she couldn't."

Martlet stood close to Berdly, her eyes wide. "She looks like…"

"A spider," Susie finished. *A really big, messed-up spider.*

Spider-Doe had restrained the lizard's arms, but it was still trampling around, thrashing its tail and slamming itself against the rocks and pillars, trying to shake her off. It was almost like she was riding it, like she was at a rodeo and it was an angry bull she was trying to tame.

"That's enough out of you," Spider-Doe said. Another one of those weird tentacles ripped out of her side and wrapped itself around the handle of Susie's axe. It wrenched the blade free of the monster's spine and handed it to Noelle. "Stay still!"

And then she jumped off the lizard's back, axe raised high in both hands, and brought it down on the creature's arm…

And sliced the limb clean off.

Berdly gasped, and Martlet let out a scream, her voice cracking. But it was nothing compared to the raspy shriek of pain the lizard released, thrashing harder. Spider-Doe ignored them all, withdrawing those weird tentacles and releasing the lizard. The creature immediately ran, scrambling away unsteadily on two legs and its remaining arm. The stump of the other arm was spurting blood as it dove into a deeper part of the water and disappeared, leaving only the churn of bubbles and blood in its wake.

Susie ran up to Spider-Doe, pulling at her hair in horrified frustration. “What did you do that for?! You let it get away!”

Noelle was holding the severed arm up with a tentacle rope, using her free hand to retrieve a glass vial from the belt hidden under her costume.“It doesn’t matter,” she said. “If I tracked it down once, I can find it again. And I got what I needed for now.”

“You *chopped her arm off!”* Martlet shouted, her and Berdly running up to join them. “What were you *thinking?”*

“That wasn’t just some mindless beast, Noelle!” Berdly lectured. He looked at the severed arm with a queasy expression. “That’s our teacher. That’s Ms. Alphys!”

“I know that!” Spider-Doe snapped, glaring at him with those spooky white-on-black eyes. She placed the vial carefully under the flow of blood from the severed end of the arm, collecting the greenish fluid. “And I was *thinking* that I won’t be able to find a way to cure her if I don’t have something to analyze first.”

“We could have taken her unharmed!” Martlet shouted. “We came here to save her, not mutilate her!”

“I saw an opportunity, so I took it! What were *you* going to do? Let’s say you did manage to knock that thing out somehow. Then what? Were you going to drag an unconscious monster that size all the way back up to the surface? Drop it off at the police station? How would anyone contain a creature like that?” She topped off her test tube and sealed it, then threw the monster’s arm away with a splash, the tentacle retracting back into her costume. “You had no plan here, did you? Just making it up as you go. You’re lucky that thing didn’t tear you to pieces! At least I know what I’m doing!”

“All this for a blood sample?” Susie snarled. “Martlet’s right, you didn’t even try to find another way. You’re supposed to be helping people, not hacking them to pieces!”

“I *am* helping people!” Spider-Doe shouted. She still had the axe in her hand, blood dripping off the edge of the glowing blade. “I saved your worthless life, didn’t I?”

“Noelle!” Berdly chided.

Susie bared her teeth. “Call me worthless again, Holiday, see what #*@$ing happens.”

“You want to fight again?” Spider-Doe taunted. She threw the axe down on the ground between them, right at Susie’s feet. “There, take your weapon and make it a fair fight. Come on. Give me your best shot.”

Susie bent and picked up the axe. It was buzzing with power, all topped up with kinetic energy. She felt the vibration running up her arm, imagining how far Spider-Doe would go flying if she hit her at this range with a shockwave. It’d serve the super-powered maniac right.

But then Martlet was laying a hand on her arm. “Susie.” She looked down to see the bluebird staring up at her with a pleading look, shaking her head slightly. “Susie, don’t.”

Susie exhaled, and then hit the button on the axe handle to retract the blade. She looked back at Noelle. “I’m not a hero,” she said, “so it’s not my job to fight villains.”

Spider-Doe let out a disbelieving little laugh. “What? Is that what you think I am?”

“Look at yourself, Noelle,” Berdly said. “This black costume, these new powers, the way you’ve been acting lately… You’ve changed. It’s like - like you’ve gone to the dark side.”

“What - what does that even mean!” Noelle protested. “Look at *you,* Berdly! You’re wearing the clothes of an *actual* supervillain!”

“It doesn’t matter what the costume is!” Martlet said, pushing forward to get up close to Noelle. “It matters what you do with it! Berdly and Susie just wanted to help. We were trying to be heroes, like you ar - like I *thought* you were.”

“Get out of my face, Martlet!” Noelle snapped, shoving her away. “You don’t know the first thing about being a hero! None of you do!”

Susie snorted. “Maybe if they had better role models...”

“Oh, shut up, Susie!” Spider-Doe exploded. “None of you understand! I have been doing *everything* I can, and it’s never enough for you! You don’t know what it feels like. Knowing that no matter what you do, no matter how hard you try, someone always gets hurt.” She took a deep, shuddering breath, the weird rippling surface of her costume quivering. “I am *tired,* and *fed up* with giving everything to this city, to my so-called friends, and getting *nothing* in return. Everything I do for you just gets thrown back in my face! You all talk so much about wanting to be heroes, but you have no idea what it takes! If you did, you would never want to be like me. If you *knew,* you wouldn’t run off and pull a stunt like this! You’d be *grateful* someone else is there to solve all your problems for you. And now you want to tell me I’m doing it the wrong way? Well *you don’t get to!* You have no right to complain after I literally saved all your lives!”

“I saved yours first,” Susie said in a quiet rumble. “Back in the church, remember? Starting to wonder what the hell I did that for.”

“Then we’ll call it even. I don’t need anything from you, Susie. Except for you to stay away from my friends.”

“And I don’t need to listen to you bitch and moan about how hard your life is!” Susie spat. “Boo-hoo, poor me, I’m a misunderstood celebrity superhero! Nobody knows what it’s like! Screw you, Holiday. If you had any idea what a hard life *really* looks like, you’d be ashamed to go around whining like that.”

*“You think I wanted this?!”* Spider-Doe screamed at her. “I didn’t ask for this responsibility! I didn’t ask to be a hero! It shouldn’t have been me. It…it was supposed to be Kris.”

Susie shrugged. “Then quit if you hate it so much. No one asked you to do this either.”

Spider-Doe gave a half-hearted laugh. “It’s not that simple, Susie. Someone has to do it. Things are falling apart out there. The world needs heroes. I may not be perfect, but right now? We’re the *only hero you’ve got.* All I’m asking is that you show a little more respect.”

“You *had* our respect, Noelle,” Berdly said. “You lost that all on your own.”

Susie took his shoulder, turning him and Martlet away. “Come on. Let’s go.”

“You’re just going to walk away?” Spider-Doe called after them as they headed back to the tunnel. “Fine! Go then! I don’t need you! We don’t need any of you!”

“She keeps saying ‘we’...” Berdly muttered under his breath.

Spider-Doe’s voice kept shouting after them. “Do you even know the way back? What if you get lost down here!”

Martlet stopped at the mouth of the exit tunnel, and turned to look back at Noelle. “We know the way home,” she said, her quiet voice carrying over the surface of the water. “You…you can find your own way back to the light.”

They limped down the tunnel, leaving Spider-Doe behind. Martlet was leaning on Berdly as they walked, crying softly. “I’m sorry,” she whimpered. “This was a muh-mistake. I shouldn’t have b-brought you here. I’m so sorry!”

“It’s not your fault,” Susie grunted. “Least none of us got hurt too bad.” One promise she’d been able to keep, at least. Not that she’d been much use back there.

“And we learned one thing,” Berdly said. “Something is seriously wrong with Spider-Doe.”

“Told you,” Susie muttered. “Going around chopping off arms and chewing us out when we don’t say thank you? The girl’s a maniac.”

“She wasn’t always like that,” Berdly protested. “Something’s changed.”

“Well she’d better snap out of it soon,” Susie said. “Because if she keeps going off the deep end like this…”

She trailed off, letting the rest go unspoken. But in her mind, the thought was clear as day and loud as a siren: *Then someone’s going to have to stop her.*

# Chapter 16: Heart-to-Heart

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

By the time Noelle returned to the hospital, the sun was rising. It was a grey and dreary morning, rain still slowly turning the snow to slush, but she had, in fact, made her way back to the light. In the literal sense, at least.

She could still smell the stink of the sewers on her, despite the rain washing her costume clean, but that was nothing compared to the bitter taste in her mouth that the interaction with Susie, Berdly and Martlet had left her with. She shouldn't have blown up at them like that. They'd been stupid and reckless, letting Susie lead them into danger, and she'd been worried about their safety

***because that always has to be your responsibility***

but she couldn't expect them to understand. One dangerous adventure in the sewers couldn't compare to all the things she'd been through. No one could possibly understand her, not really. No one except Kris

**And me.**

and her Other. It had literally been in her mind, fought by her side. The others didn't see that. They looked at her and thought she had changed, and she had. But that wasn't a bad thing. She was stronger now. And she'd be even stronger when she stopped craving their understanding and just accepted that normal people would never really know her.

She entered the hospital room through the window, too exhausted to go through the hassle of checking in at the front desk. She didn't want anyone to know she was here. She just wanted to be alone with Kris.

Thankfully, Toriel had gone home for the night. She was grateful for the privacy, but it made her feel sad and a bit guilty. It was one thing to leave Kris in the care of their family, and another to leave them all alone.

"I'm sorry I was gone for so long," she said to them softly, though of course they couldn't hear her. They looked the same as they had for the last couple days, pale and still, a cannula in their nose giving them oxygen, their hair messily falling across their face. One might think they were dead were it not for the faint trace of color in their cheeks, the beep of the heart monitor, and the soft rise and fall of their chest.

Noelle bent to brush their hair out of their face. Her mask melted away at her mental command, letting her press her lips to their forehead. "I'm here now, okay? I took care of everything. Raven won't come after us again, so you don't have to worry anymore. You can wake up now. Everything's going to be alright…if you just…" She choked back a sob. "Just wake up, please, Kris, can you do that for me? Can you please just wake up…"

She held her breath for a long moment. Nothing. Kris didn't stir.

Noelle released her breath in a shaky exhale. Of course nothing happened. This wasn't some fairy tale where she could give her true love a kiss and wake them from their deep slumber. They would either be okay or they wouldn't, and nothing she could do, no amount of praying or begging or crying, would change that.

Suddenly she felt a bone-deep exhaustion flooding her body, making every muscle ache. How long had it been since she'd slept? She needed a shower to wash the stench of the sewers off, and a long nap.

The fold-out chair the nurses had provided for her was still there next to the hospital bed. Not as comfortable as her own bed would have been, but she didn't want to go home just yet, and she wouldn't have had the strength to swing all that way even if she'd wanted to. Instead she lay down on the makeshift bed, pulled a throw blanket over herself, and curled into a ball. She tried to steady her breathing and still her mind. Kris would still be there when she woke up…

She had just closed her eyes when she heard the sound of a body shifting in bed, and a very small voice said, "Why does it smell like shit in here?"

Noelle sat bolt upright, her fatigue forgotten. "Kris?"

They were awake, their pale red irises watching her from under half-closed lids. They shifted their weight slightly, trying to sit up, and groaned. "Ugh, yeah, it's still me. I think..."

"Oh my god," Noelle breathed. She rushed to sit on their bedside, pushing them gently back down against the pillow. "Don't try to move. Are you hurt? How do you feel?"

"Like I got hit by a truck made of electricity," Kris muttered. Their voice was hoarse and shaky. "I'm still a little numb…"

"That might be the medication. Here, drink some water!" Noelle said, handing them a plastic bottle from among their family's things on the table. "You'll feel better!"

Kris drank, deep gulps until the bottle was empty. Then they settled back, their gaze moving slowly across the room. "How long have I been in the hospital?"

"A few days," Noelle said. "Angel, Kris, I was so worried about you. We all were. Your whole family has been -" she caught herself and added quickly, "I mean, Ms. Toriel was here, and Asriel's on his way. They're going to be so happy to hear you're finally awake!"

"I was out for that long…?" Kris said weakly.

"I didn't leave your side for a whole day," Noelle told them. She took their cold hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze. "And I never stopped praying for you."

Kris squeezed her hand back, though not with much force. Their lips were slightly parted, breathing shallowly through their mouth. “Thank you, Noelle…”

It was lucky that she’d gotten back to Kris when she had; they could easily have woken up alone and disoriented, with neither her nor their family around to greet them. She banished that thought from her mind and leaned in to give them a light kiss. “I’m just glad you’re okay.”

She brushed her hand across the lightning-branch scars on their cheek. “Your poor face, though…”

“What?” Kris tried to rise again, a note of panic in their voice. “What’s wrong with my face?”

“Nothing!” Noelle said hurriedly. “I mean, nothing that bad. You just, um, you have some scars…from the lightning.” Her eyes followed the scars down their neck and under the lip of their thin hospital gown. “I don’t know, um, how far they extend. Looks like maybe your whole left side…”

Kris touched their face, but there wasn’t anything to feel - the marks weren’t raised lumps of scar tissue, just red, inflamed lines under the skin. “What do they look like?”

“Kind of cool, actually,” Noelle said. She wanted to make them feel better, but also it was true. “Like frost on a window.”

Kris sighed. “I guess as long as they make me look sexy and mysterious, not ugly and disfigured.”

“Definitely the former,” Noelle said with a smile. “And they might fade, with time. They’re already looking a little better than before.” She leaned in to kiss their cheek, brushing her lips softly against their scarred skin.

Kris wrinkled their nose adorably. “Seriously though, why do you smell like that?”

Noelle laughed, too relieved to be embarrassed. “It’s nothing. I had Spider-Doe things that I had to go do, and uh, the sewers might have been involved. Don’t ask. But it’s okay! I’m taking care of everything. I even found Raven and dealt with him, so you don’t have to worry. No one else is coming after us.”

“Raven…” Kris said, frowning slightly. “He was at the ice skating rink.”

“He was. How much do you remember?”

“I…the last thing I remember is Electron.” They shut their eyes, their breathing growing heavier and more rapid. “I was fighting him, trying to distract him so he wouldn’t come after you. I guess…he got lucky. One moment I was swinging around, the next I was on my back on the ice. The rink was melting around me and I…I couldn’t move. My body wouldn’t listen, and it felt like…like I was on fire. I thought I was going to burn up.” Kris’s eyes blinked open, and they stared up at her with a startling intensity, fear creeping into their expression. “How am I still alive?”

Noelle swallowed, her throat suddenly tight. “The doctors said - they said that a normal human would probably have died. But your body, it’s different. Something about the radioactivity in your blood, how it interacted with the electricity…” She took their hand again, squeezing tight. “It doesn’t matter. I knew you would pull through. You’re so, so strong, Kris. You’re Spider-Human! Nothing can keep you down for long.”

“Noelle… This was close this time. Way, way too close.” Kris’s chest was still rising and falling quickly, and the peaks on the heart monitor had begun to spike higher, the steady beeps coming more rapidly.

“Hey! Hey, it’s okay,” Noelle said. She ran her hand through their hair, trying to soothe them. “It’s okay, Kris. You’re safe now.”

“I could have been killed,” Kris gasped. *“You* could have died! We weren’t even *doing* anything. We were just skating and they just *attacked us* and -”

“Hey, look at me!” Noelle tilted their head in her direction so she could look them in the eye. They looked so scared; it broke her heart. “It was awful, Kris, but we survived. I took care of Electron and Raven. We won’t have to worry about them again. I saved you, okay? I saved you.”

“I remember,” Kris whispered. “You were standing over Electron. You looked different…” They looked down the length of her body with wide, anxious eyes, and Noelle realized that she was still wearing her black costume, at least from the neck down. “Why…why do you look like that? You changed your costume?”

“It’s…it’s a long story,” Noelle said. “What matters is I’m stronger now, Kris. I can protect you. I can protect everyone.”

But Kris shook their head. “The way you moved, when you were attacking Electron…it didn’t look right. Like it wasn’t you at all. You looked like - like some kind of animal. You kept hitting him and *hitting him.”*

“Because he *hurt* you, Kris! I had to stop him, so I did. I stopped Raven, too.”

“That vigilante in the news,” Kris said. “The one you said was a copycat…” They propped themself upright, pulling on the bars on the side of the hospital bed, and Noelle scooted off it and took a step back. “Noelle…what did you do?”

“What I had to, Kris. I realized something, after the attack. We’re always going to be targets, aren’t we? There’s always going to be someone trying to take us down. Unless we strike back hard. I need to show everyone what happens to people who try to hurt us.”

Kris clutched their side, grunting in pain, but when Noelle reached out to steady them, they flinched away from her touch. “You want people to be scared of you?”

“The bad guys, yes!” she clarified. She withdrew her hand, feeling hurt at the look on their face. “How are we supposed to deter supervillains from wreaking havoc if they’re not afraid to mess with us? We’re not a threat to them, just a nuisance, or a rival, or a - a messed-up trophy! No one’s scared of high schoolers

in colorful costumes." Noelle crossed her black-clad arms over the jagged white spider emblem on her chest. "But maybe they'll think twice about coming after us when they hear what happened to Raven."

Kris shook their head. "I just…I didn't think that was the kind of hero you wanted to be."

"What I want isn't the point!" Their disapproval felt like a slap in the face. Why couldn't Kris understand? She was only trying to keep them safe. To keep *everyone* safe, whether they appreciated her for it or not. "I *wanted* us to be a team. To be heroes together. And at first, I thought that's what you wanted, too. But it isn't, is it, Kris? Not anymore."

Kris looked at her for a long moment, their expression conflicted and upset. Then they glanced down at their lap. Their voice was very small when they spoke, barely more than a whisper. "No, it's not."

Noelle's throat was dry, her heart skittish in her chest, kicking like a frightened fawn. "Are…are you breaking up with me?"

Kris's head snapped up. "What? No! Are *you* breaking up with *me?"*

"No!" she told them quickly. "No, Kris, I want you in my life! I want to be your partner. I just also want to be *Spider-Human's* partner. I need you out there. I'm doing my best to hold it all together, but…I'm struggling. You left me to do this alone, Kris, and I don't understand why. What did I do wrong?"

Kris looked shocked. "Noelle, you didn't do anything wrong. It's not about you."

"Then what is it?" she pleaded. "Why don't you want to be a hero anymore?"

"Because my own father tried to kill me!" Kris blurted out.

There was a moment of stunned silence while Noelle tried to wrap her head around that. "You mean when we fought him in his penthouse?"

Kris shook their head. "After that. When I was alone with him, after you went to save Dess and ended up captured by Gaster. I was alone with him, and he…he was going to kill me."

"Oh my god," Noelle said. "All I'd heard was that you were still there when the police showed up to arrest him. Why didn't you tell me about this?"

"What was the point?" Kris said. They sounded so tired, and though they'd ducked their head, their hair hanging over their eyes, Noelle knew them well enough to be able to hear the tears in their voice. "We stopped him, we won. It was over. I didn't want to think about it anymore. But since then, every time I've tried putting my mask back on, I start thinking about his hand covering my face and I just…I can't breathe." They looked up at her, scarred cheeks streaked with tears. "I can't do it, Noelle. Maybe one day, but for now…I just can't."

Noelle perched herself on the end of the bed, moving a little closer while still giving Kris their space. "So that's why you stopped being Spider-Human? This

whole time, it was about what Asgore did to you?"

Kris laughed darkly. "It's *all* about what Asgore did to me, isn't it? His hate for humans, his poison…I think it got into my blood long before that spider ever bit me. Noelle, do you remember what I told you the night we first kissed, about why I became Spider-Human in the first place?"

Noelle nodded, thinking back to that heart-to-heart that had pushed her into finally admitting her feelings for them. "You wanted to make something good out of the human part of your identity. You felt ashamed to be human and wanted to turn it into something you could be proud of instead."

"I hated myself," Kris said bitterly. "For a long time, I hated feeling different. And then I got my powers, and I realized what I could do with them. That I had the chance to make a new identity, to take the things I didn't like about myself and change how people saw them. But that's the thing, Noelle. Spider-Human was never supposed to be *me.* I wanted the human part of me to be a hero so that the rest of me could just be Kris. And then the whole world found out who I was, and now…now it feels like "just Kris" doesn't exist anymore."

"I…I think I know the feeling," Noelle said. She was still getting used to it herself, going from an ordinary, nerdy high schooler to one of NHC's most famous citizens. It still made her head spin sometimes, thinking of the millions of people who knew her name now.

"No offense, but you don't know all of it," Kris said. Their voice sounded tired, strained from all the talking, but they pressed on. "You actually like who you are. You're a monster, you're from a good family, you're smart and outgoing and likeable. But I was always just some nobody kid who got picked on for not having fur or feathers or scales. I always had 'human' hanging over me."

"That doesn't mean you don't belong," Noelle told them. "There are lots of humans in this city."

"Not ones who were raised by monster families, or go to majority-monster schools. It's not about belonging, Noelle, it's about what people see when they look at me. Ever since I got outed, they don't just see a human, they see Spider-Human. They see my silly, childish attempt to make peace with my own identity, and that's *all* they see. I'm proud of what Spider-Human accomplished, but I don't want to spend the rest of my life with people thinking of me as them. I don't want people to love me for being them or to try and kill me for being them. I don't want to be *them* at all. I want to be me. I just want to be Kris."

"That's okay!" Noelle said. "You don't need a costume or a codename to be a hero. You can just…swing around as yourself, saving people. Let people see your real face and love you for who you are. The way I love you."

"You loved Spider-Human first," Kris told her. "Before you knew they were me, you loved them so much. You wanted to be like them so badly that as soon as you got powers of your own, you tried to follow in their footsteps. You know as well as I do that I'm always going to be seen as Spider-Human, even if I leave the name behind."

Noelle scooted closer, touching their arm, and this time they let her do so, without flinching away. “Is that really so bad? Spider-Human helps people, inspires them. You inspired me.”

Kris coughed, a deep chest cough that wracked their slender body. When they had recovered enough to draw in a shaky breath, they glanced up at Noelle and said regretfully, “I shouldn’t have.”

Noelle blinked at them. “What?”

“Look at what I’ve done to you, Noelle,” Kris said quietly. “This is going to kill you eventually if you keep going. Maybe it wasn’t Electron and Raven, not this time, but sooner or later… It only takes one mistake. One bit of bad luck. If you get hurt, it’s gonna be my fault. I’m the one who made you think you had to live like this. I’m the one who “inspired” you to risk your life every day.”

“And I’m not the one who got hurt, Kris. You were.” She decided not to tell them about Raven’s poison, and Ceroba’s timely intervention. The truth was it had been a close brush with death for both of them, but she didn’t need Kris worrying about her any more than they already were. “Look, I know what we do is dangerous, but I can look after myself. I have a responsibility to use my powers to -”

“No, you don’t!” Kris almost shouted, though they were too weak to achieve much volume. “You don’t owe anyone anything. We’ve both done enough. We’re not even adults yet, for Angel’s sake. Can’t we just have safe, normal lives? Don’t we deserve that?”

Noelle could feel a gulf opening between them with every word. The force of it pushed her to leave their bedside, pacing across the small room, nervous energy filling every hoofstep. “What do you want me to do, Kris? I’ve made my choices.”

“It’s not too late,” Kris said. There was a desperate, pleading undercurrent to their voice. “You can still stop. We can go back to just being Kris and Noelle. We don’t have to risk our lives anymore.”

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “No, it’s not that simple. What about all the people we’ve helped? People who would have gotten hurt if we hadn’t been there?”

“I’m not saying never help anyone again,” Kris said. “If you see someone in danger, of course you should help them. But it doesn’t have to be your job to save everybody. No one can do all that alone - trust me, I’ve tried. The city survived before it had Spiders looking after it. It can survive without us, too.”

Noelle shot them a sharp look from across the room. “Like you would have survived without me?”

“Noelle, that’s not what -”

But it was too late. She could feel her SOUL starting to hum with emotion. She could feel it in her veins, in the way her Other stirred from slumber, the surface

of her costume rippling like sound waves moving across water as it tuned in to her emotional frequency. “Like my dad survived without me? You know I could have saved him, right? If I’d had these powers when he was killed, if I had been there…maybe he would still be alive today.”

“Noelle,” Kris whispered, “you can’t know that. If you start thinking about what ifs, you’ll only -”

“It doesn’t matter!” she interrupted. “All I know is I spent my entire life powerless. I couldn’t protect the people I love. But now I can. I’m more powerful than ever now, and you want me to give that up?”

Kris was staring at her. “Noelle, your costume is… why is it *moving?”*

Noelle ignored them. Barely even heard them. “I like who I am now, Kris. And I’m sorry you don’t feel the same way, I’m sorry you don’t want to help me, but I get it. If you don’t want to be Spider-Human anymore, I understand, and I respect that. But *you* have to understand, we’re not the same. I’m not hiding behind a mask like you were. I *chose* to give up my secret identity. Spider-Doe isn’t some other person for me - I am her, and she’s us. And I can’t let that go. Not when we’re finally making a difference.”

*“Noelle,”* Kris said, with more urgency in their voice this time. “Where did you get that costume?”

Her mask had covered her head. She hadn’t even noticed when it happened, but now she found herself looking at them through white visor-like eyes. She was trembling all over, and her costume was quivering too. Kris was looking at her, and they looked scared. Just like they had when she’d saved them at the ice skating rink.

***They don’t understand. They want to separate us!***

“You’re still recovering, Kris,” she said, turning her back on them. “You shouldn’t be worrying about this stuff now. You need to rest.”

“Wait, Noelle -”

“We can talk about this later. When you’re thinking clearly.” She paused with her hand on the doorknob. Her voice sounded colder than she meant it to, but she was so tired. Too tired to fight any more. “I’m going to go find a nurse for you. I’ll call your family, let them know you’re awake. You don’t have to worry, okay? You can just stay right there and focus on getting better. I’ll take care of everything.”

“Will you…” Kris swallowed. “Will you come back?”

“We’ll talk later,” she repeated. Her heart felt squeezed tight, as though by an invisible hand - or webs, curled like rope around her insides. “I still have work to do.”

Chapter End Notes

So how's everyone enjoying the new Deltarune chapters? I'm just finishing up Chapter 4 as I type this and I've been having a great time. No spoilers in my comments please, but I'd love to hear generally if people are having as much fun with it as I am. Finally our long famine is ended!

# Chapter 17: Angels and Devils

Gastcorp never slept, and since neither did Noelle as of late, she made the corporation's towering skyscraper her next stop of the morning. She was bone-tired, only kept awake and on her hooves by the assistance of her Other, but like she'd told Kris, there was work to be done. She could rest once everything was put right.

*And then we'll show everyone,* she thought. *They may not appreciate it now, but they'll thank us once we fix everything.*

**Then will the Krisfriend accept us?**

*I hope so.*

Noelle swung down to the entrance of Gastcorp Tower and burst through the front doors into the lobby. The last time she'd been here it had been a void of unnatural darkness, but today everything was normal. People milled about, coming and going through the futuristic atrium, balconies and high glass walls towering above her. The receptionist at the long front desk, a bespectacled otter monster, looked up with a polite and professional smile on her face - until she saw who it was and her smile faltered, replaced with a look of concern. She thumbed a button and spoke into a microphone on her desk, her voice echoing through the building's intercom speakers. "Security to the front desk, I repeat, security to the front desk please."

Noelle walked up and gave the receptionist an indignant scowl - not that the woman could see it through her mask. "Is that any way to treat someone who saved the lives of everyone in this building last week?"

"S-sorry, Spider-Doe," the receptionist said. "Company policy. We're not supposed to allow unaccompanied, um, superheroic visitors in the building…"

"Unless you need their help saving your butts, of course." Four security guards ran up, and they even had the nerve to unholster their sidearms. They paused a safe distance away, surrounding her. "Come on, guys. You know I could eat you all for breakfast without breaking a sweat. What are we doing here?"

"That's a g-great question," the receptionist said. She nervously pushed her glasses up on the bridge of her snout, sweating visibly. Angel, did Noelle really look *that* intimidating in her black costume? "What can Gastcorp do for you today, Spider-Doe?"

"Tell Gaster I need to talk to him," Noelle said. She didn't like it either, but Gastcorp was the only place where she could access the equipment necessary to analyze Alphys's blood, let alone reverse-engineer some kind of cure. Besides, she figured Gaster owed her a favor.

*"Dr.* Gaster is a very busy man," the receptionist started to say.

Noelle put her hands on the counter and leaned forward, causing the security guards to raise their weapons. “Tell him it’s urgent.”

“As you w-wish,” the receptionist stammered, leaning back in her chair. She waved at the guards to stand down and reached for the desk phone, punching in an extension number. “Yes, Dr. Gaster? It’s Cindy down at reception, sir. So sorry to disturb you, but there’s a visitor here, um, demanding to see you. Noelle Holiday… Yes, I’m afraid she’s being quite insistent. I see. Yes, of course. Very well, sir.”

She hung up the phone and looked up at Noelle. “Milo will escort you to his office.” She pointed at one of the guards, a bulky bull monster, who holstered his gun with a huff. “Have a pleasant day!”

One very long and very uncomfortable elevator ride later, Noelle was escorted into a large office. Like every room in this building, it was pristine and polished, with sleek white furniture that looked like it had been 3D-printed. Two of the office’s walls were tall glass windows that let in natural light and provided a panoramic view of the city below.

Dr. Gaster sat behind the desk at a computer, dressed as usual in his black turtleneck sweater under a white lab coat. He didn’t even glance up from his monitor when they entered. “Thank you, Milo, that will be all.”

“I’ll be right outside,” Milo grunted, “if you need anything, sir.”

Noelle stood there awkwardly for several long seconds, waiting for Gaster to acknowledge her, but he seemed more interested in answering his email or whatever. Was that supposed to be some kind of intimidation tactic, making her wait?

She decided to break the silence. “I think your guard still holds a grudge.” Gaster didn’t respond, just clacked away at his keyboard. “Because I punched him out that one time.” More typing noises. “You know, when I was escaping after you tried to take me captive. Remember that?”

“And yet here you are, back again of your own free will.” Gaster finally turned away from his computer to look at her, steepling his long bony fingers under his chin. “Did you stop by just to reminisce about old times, Noelle, or am I to assume you need something?”

*Straight down to business, I guess.*

“I’ll cut to the chase, then. There’s a teacher at my school who recently transformed herself into a rampaging lizard beast,” Noelle said. “You may have heard about it on the news?”

“Ah yes, Alphys,” Gaster said. “Unfortunate bit of business. A brilliant scientist, but so impulsive. She never did have the best judgement.”

“So you do know her. She would always talk about how she used to work here.”

Gaster chuckled. “I doubt she told you everything.”

“Do you know how this could have happened? What she might have done to herself?”

Gaster gestured at the chair in front of his desk. “Have a seat, Noelle.”

Something about that felt like a trap. She crossed her arms and looked down at him. “I think I’d rather stand.”

“Suit yourself,” Gaster told her. He stood and moved to the window, staring out at the early morning sky with his hands clasped between his back. “Before we go any further, I should tell you, I *am* still grateful for your help with that…incident recently.”

Noelle frowned. “I think you’re the only person I know who can make a ‘thank you’ feel like a threat.”

Gaster turned his skeletal head to look over his shoulder at her, smiling grimly. “And you used to be so polite…”

“Cut the crap and tell me what you know, Doctor.”

“Very well. Alphys was attempting to create a formula that turns regular monsters into Boss Monsters. I have to assume that her transformation is the result of an… ill-advised attempt to test the results on herself.”

“That’s insane! Why would she do that?”

“Let’s just say your teacher has a history of improper drug testing. Perhaps she thought it more noble to limit the damage to her own person this time.”

“She nearly killed two of my friends! And you’re saying you knew about this?” Noelle challenged. “You enabled this research?”

“Of course I did,” Gaster said, infuriatingly calm as always. “It dovetailed nicely with a line of study I had been pursuing myself…with your unwitting help, as it turns out.”

“What do you -?” Noelle began to say, but then the dots connected in her mind and she gasped. “That blood sample you took from me? *That’s* what caused this?”

“That, and other ingredients,” Gaster said. “The hope was to replicate your powers. Though from the sound of it, there are still some kinks to work out in the -”

He cut off with a grunt as Noelle vaulted over the desk and slammed him against the window, hard enough that cracks began to form in the glass. “You opportunistic bastard! You tried to *weaponize* my *blood?* I ought to throw you out this window before your stupid experiments get anyone else hurt!”

“I didn’t want anyone to get hurt!” Gaster protested. “I would have given that serum the same rigorous testing process as any experimental drug. It’s not my fault that Alphys decided she couldn’t wait.”

“You should have known what she would do!” Noelle shouted in his face. “You should have stopped her!”

“Noelle, please. You didn’t come here to defenestrate me, did you? You require my assistance.”

Noelle glared at him for a moment before releasing her grip on his coat. She dug out the vial of blood from her belt, her costume pulling itself away to let her hand through. She held it up, letting the green liquid catch the light. “I took this off of Alphys after she changed. I’m hoping it holds the key to reversing whatever happened to her.”

“Hahaha,” Gaster laughed dryly. “And to think, a moment ago you were chastising *me* for taking blood samples without consent.”

“I’m trying to fix *your* mess, not cause a new one! But I need your help to make a cure. I don’t have the resources on my own.”

“Noelle, Noelle…” Gaster shook his head, practically tsk-tsking her the way you might a child who has disappointed you. “My company is not a rent-a-lab service. Why should I help you unless you’re prepared to offer something in return?”

Noelle clenched her fist. “I *saved* your company, and probably your life, from *your* screw-up last week. Didn’t you just say you were grateful? You *owe* me.”

“From a certain perspective,” Gaster countered, “you could say that you were paying me back for everything I’ve done for you. Or did you forget where your powers came from?”

Noelle took a step forward, and on her mental command, tentacles ripped their way out of her back, curling in the air like spider legs. “Not all of them.”

But Gaster didn’t look intimidated. There was fascination in his dark eyes, and desire, too. “Ah, there it is. I had been wondering what became of it. It seems the two of you have…bonded quite successfully.”

“You said this thing was like a force of nature,” Noelle told him, staring him down. “You were right. It’s made me stronger than ever before. Maybe you should think about that before you refuse to help us.”

“But I’m *not* refusing you, Noelle,” Gaster said. “Merely proposing a trade. With the sample you’ve provided, I’m confident I can devise a counter-serum to restore your teacher to her former self. I’ll even agree to end my failed research into recreating your abilities.”

“And in return?”

“In return,” Gaster said, pointing at the shifting black surface of her suit, “I want to study that. When you and I closed the portal and the darkness evaporated, I thought all of it was lost. But now I see that you walked away with the only remaining sample. Give it to me to study and I will help you with whatever you need.”

Noelle's costume began to roil and seethe. **Deceiver. Butcher. He wishes to separate us. We will not allow it!**

"It's not that simple, Doctor," Noelle said, struggling to silence the Other's thoughts and hold back the urge to lash out. "It's not an item to be traded away. It has thoughts, feelings. It doesn't want to turn itself over to you."

"Tell it I mean it no harm," Gaster urged her. "I wish only to better understand it. One of these creatures of darkness has touched my mind before, and all I've wanted since that day is to explore that connection further, to discover more about what it is and where it comes from."

Noelle didn't have to relay the message, of course - the Other already understood Gaster's words. Its response was not long in coming: **It is true. I can smell the Codex on him. He has been a host before, but not to me. Not my host! My bond is to you, and I will not leave your side, dear kind Noelle-Host.**

Noelle shook her head. "It doesn't want to go. It wants to stay with me."

"I know I cannot force you. Perhaps a compromise, then?" Gaster asked. Noelle could hear a note of desperation in his voice; he wanted this badly. "I wouldn't presume to separate it from you entirely, but I know something about how these beings' amorphous bodies work from first-hand experience. What if it could be persuaded to part with just a sliver of its form? Not the entire creature, not enough to bond with, just…a tissue sample. Something to analyze and examine, something that might help me learn more."

*Is that possible?* Noelle wondered. *Could you throw him a bone without it harming you?*

**I could. My body is not like yours, where every piece has a function. It would be possible for me to sever a portion of myself and leave it behind as a separate organism. It is a form of…I believe the term you use would be 'asexual reproduction.' Cellular mitosis. The discarded tissue would not be of my mind; I would be unable to control it, but I would not be injured by its absence.**

*I know you don't like this, but we have leverage over him and this is the only chance we have at restoring Alphys to normal. How much trouble do you think Gaster could really cause with a small sample?*

**It is unlikely he could bond with it. But I do not know for sure.** It paused for a moment, hesitating. **I will trust in your judgement, Noelle-Host. But if he were to abuse my kind in his pursuit of knowledge, we would return and destroy him, yes?**

*Yes,* Noelle thought darkly, *I think we would have to.*

"What is it saying?" Gaster asked, an eager glint in his dark eye sockets.

"It'll do it," Noelle told him. "But only a small sample, and only for analysis. If you try to bond with it, if you lose control again, we'll know and we'll stop you."

“Of course, of course,” Gaster smiled. “You needn’t fear. I agree to your terms, Spider-Doe. Now, how does this process work exactly?”

“Not so fast. You’re not getting anything until you’ve kept your end of the bargain.” She held the vial of lizard’s blood out to him. “Cure first, payment after.”

Gaster took it, a pinprick of light twinkling in the black holes of his eyes. “No time like the present, then. This will go faster with an assistant - or two, perhaps. Follow me to the lab and we can begin.”

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Susie woke to the sound of raised voices - or rather, one voice raised in anger and another quiet, soft but firm. It was the louder voice that broke through the haze of sleep and made her instinctively freeze up in bed, her heartbeat suddenly spiking. She would know her father’s voice anywhere.

For a groggy moment, she thought she was back at home, her father yelling at her to get her ass up, that she was going to be late for school. But then she remembered where she was: in her little closet room at the base of the bell tower at Our Lady of the Angel. She’d limped in late last night, exhausted from her adventures and drenched from the rain, the stench of the sewers still clinging to her clothes. She had stopped only to raid the church’s pantry for snacks before returning to her room, shrugging off her wet jacket and pants, turning on the little space heater, and crawling into her meager bed. It wasn’t much of a residence, but it beat the crowded youth shelters.

She didn’t know what time it was, but her dad’s voice only sounded a *little* slurred, so it was probably still morning. She could hear him shouting through the door, just down the hall in the narthex, which Father Murdock had taught her was the fancy name for the entrance room of a church, between the front doors and the nave.

The other voice was familiar too, though it was calmer, lower, and that meant she couldn’t make out the words. Father Murdock’s voice. She barely saw him most days, since she was always sneaking in late at night, but he knew she was still sleeping here. It sounded like he was covering for her, and Susie couldn’t let him do that. She wouldn’t have put it past her dad to start a fight with a blind priest.

She hurried to put her still-damp clothes back on, bracing herself to face the music. She should have known this couldn’t last. For all his talk of not caring what became of her, he always tried to get her back eventually. He complained constantly when she was under his roof, but he still wanted her close at hand. Susie snorted darkly. Of course he did. Taking out his anger on the drywall probably wasn’t the same.

Well, if he wanted her, he could tell her to her face. Susie was done being afraid of him. She'd stood up to an out-of-control Spider-Doe and tangled with a bloodthirsty lizard monster. Her dad was just a fat, drunk old man. If he tried anything, she'd kick his ass.

So she tugged on her too-small shoes, leaving the laces untied, and went out to give him an earful. She could hear his voice more clearly as she approached. "For the last time, damn you, where's my daughter? I know she's here!"

Susie pushed the side door to the narthex open with a creak. Her dad was standing there, looking as schlubby as always - not exactly dressed in his Sunday best, but then, he'd never been a churchgoer. Father Murdock stood between him and the door, and the turtle monster turned his head towards her as well when he heard the hinges squeak, though of course he couldn't see her.

Susie didn't keep him in suspense wondering who it was. "Dad," she acknowledged. "Guessing you're not here for mass or whatever."

"Susan!" her father shouted. "God dammit, I knew it!"

"How'd you find me?"

"You're still my kid, ain'tcha? Think I can't track down my own daughter? You were arrested for trespassing here, it's all in your police file. Cops had to give it to me when I asked." He pushed past Father Murdock, bumping the priest more forcefully than necessary with his shoulder as he passed. "This gimp-eyed moralizer tried to tell me you weren't here. Preacher, don't that book of yours have something to say about lying?"

"There are worse sins." Murdock planted his red-tipped folding cane on the ground in front of him, bracing his weight on it. He wore a black suit with a priest's white collar under his black and yellow speckled shell, and though his eyes were covered by red-tinted glasses, Susie always felt like he was looking right at her when he spoke - nothing seemed to escape his notice, even blind as he was.

"Susie has been a frequent parishioner these last few days," he confessed. He had a calm voice, smooth as butter. "But I wasn't aware she was already here today. Must not have noticed her come in. Our doors are, of course, open to everyone, and our morning service will be starting soon. Perhaps the two of you would like to join us?"

"Nah, $#*& that," her father said. "Don't need you filling her head with any more nonsense than you already have, preacher."

"I take it you're not a believer, Mr. Thompson?" Murdock said.

Susie snorted. "He's not exactly the godly type."

Her dad pointed a lumpy finger at her. "Don't you talk for me. Don't want to hear another word out of you until we get home, you hear me?"

"I'm not *going* home. Not going anywhere with you."

“You’ll go where I tell you, you little b- …little pain in my ass.” He laughed, softening his tone, slipping on that mask he usually wore in public. It didn’t fit him well, and didn't do much to disguise him. “Teenagers, am I right? You got any kids, preacher?”

“No,” Murdock said. “I’m afraid not. It’s a condition of the job, you know.”

“Right, right. Of course. Probably smart of you, given…” He waved his hand dismissively at the priest’s face. “Wouldn’t want to pass on the condition.”

Father Murdock’s cordial tone grew a bit sharper. “It’s not genetic, actually. Accident. When I was a kid.”

“Well, ain’t that a shame,” Susie’s dad said, but he was looking straight at her and not the Father when he added, “Suppose that’s life though, ain’t it? Accidents happen to kids sometimes.” He turned to go, jerking his head towards the door like he expected Susie to follow at his heels like a whipped dog. “Com'n, Susan, let’s go.”

Susie didn’t budge. Her heart was beating fast, but she wasn’t going to let him win that easily. He’d have to drag her out kicking and screaming if it came to that. “Thought you didn’t want me home anymore.”

“Of course I do. Yer my daughter, aint’cha?”

“That why you told Chief Undyne you didn’t care if I rotted in jail?”

“I didn’t mean it. I was angry. You’re always getting yourself in trouble, it’s enough to drive a father mad. But I ain’t giving up on you, Susan. You belong at home, where I can look after you.”

Susie clenched her fists, nails digging into the scales of her palms. “Is that what you call it?”

“Listen here,” her dad started, stepping towards her.

He was stopped by a cane held up against his chest. “It seems the girl doesn’t want to go with you, Mr. Thompson,” Father Murdock said. His voice remained polite, but Susie knew anger well enough to catch the undertones.

“The %#*& difference does that make?” her dad snarled. “She ain’t 18 yet, and I’m still her daddy. Who the $*#$ do you think you are?”

“I’m a man of the Angel,” Murdock said, his voice low and firm. “And you’re in the Angel’s house. I won’t have people dragged from here against their will.”

Susie put her hand on Murdock’s arm. “Hey, you don’t have to stick up for me like that, Father. You’ve done enough. This isn’t your problem, you know?”

“Susie, answer me honestly. Do you want to go with him?”

Susie glanced at her dad’s furious expression and gave a small shake of her head, before remembering that the priest couldn’t see that. “No.”

“Then you don’t have to,” Father Murdock said. He lowered his cane and leaned against it, looking at Susie’s dad with his sightless gaze as though daring him to object.

And object he did. “The hell she doesn’t! You can’t keep my kid from me. I’ll come back here with the cops and have you arrested, you blind pervert!”

“You do that,” Father Murdock said. “I’m sure the police would love to hear all about it. Maybe you can shed some light for them on how your daughter broke her ribs, or why she’s walking with a limp.”

“How should I know? She ain’t been home, and the little delinquent’s always getting into fights. That’s why she needs her dad looking out for her.”

“My own father was a fighter, too. The man threw a mean punch. But only ever in the ring.” Murdock took a heavy breath. “You have legal custody of your daughter, Mr. Thompson, and I don’t mean to deny you your rights. The police would almost certainly take your side as well, so you can bring them to my doorstep if you like. But I think it’d be a pertinent detail to include in that police report that your daughter is afraid to go home with you. I think some people might take an interest in that.”

Susie’s dad puffed up his chest like he was going to say something, all red in the face with anger, but just at that moment the church’s bell rang in the tower up above, calling the hour, loud enough to cut off the conversation. A moment later, the front door creaked open and an elderly monster couple poked their head in. “Father Murdock? Is the service canceled today? We’re all waiting outside.”

“Not at all,” the priest said, though he didn’t move from where he stood between Susie and her father. “Forgive me, I had some business to attend to and it must have slipped my mind to open the doors. Please, come in.” He stared up at her dad from behind his red-tinted glasses. “I have a sermon to deliver soon, so if we’re done here…”

Susie’s dad’s eyes flicked from the priest to the crowd of churchgoers streaming in through the doors. “Sure, sure preacher, we’re done. For now. But this ain’t over, you hear me?”

Murdock tipped his head. “Loud and clear.”

Susie’s dad pushed past the parishioners and out the door, muttering blasphemous words under his breath.

Susie let out a long exhale. Saved by the bell. And while she felt slightly embarrassed to have a blind priest fighting her battles for her, she had to admit that it was impressive as hell. “Thanks for that, Father. Hey, you know, for a religious guy, you’re pretty badass. Thought you priests were supposed to be the stuffy, lawful types.”

Murdock smiled. “I just don’t like bullies, that’s all. Now, I really must get myself together if I’m going to lead this service. I know you usually sit these things out, but…you’re welcome to join us, if you like.”

“Maybe…” Susie glanced at the people milling into the nave. She hardly fit in among them, but maybe every flock needed a black sheep. “Hey, one thing before you go. How did you know about the broken ribs and the limp and stuff?”

“Your breathing is shallow,” Murdock said. “There’s a wheeze to it. And you drag your foot when you walk.”

“You can hear all that?”

“I have very good hearing. You should probably see a doctor, by the way.”

“Eh, I’ll heal,” Susie shrugged. “Don’t have insurance anyway.”

“I know a nurse who does pro-bono work sometimes,” Murdock suggested. “She might be able to patch you up.”

“Pro-bono? That like, some kinda bone doctor?”

The priest laughed, warm and genuine. “Something like that. Susie…you know you can’t stay here forever, right? The Church is a place of sanctuary, and I’m happy to shelter you for as long as I can, but it’s not a long-term solution. I’ll do what I can, but I can only do so much.”

“I know,” Susie muttered, scratching the back of her head. “I’ll figure something out and get out of your hair soon, I promise. But in the meantime…I appreciate all the help. Really.”

“Just doing my job. May the Angel bless you,” Father Murdock said as he left the room.

*Right,* Susie thought. *That’s me. Real goddamn blessed.*

He poked his head back out through the doors to the nave. “Oh, and don’t be shy about using the shower in the rectory if you need. I have a very good sense of smell, too.”

“Yeah, um, sure thing.” She took a self-conscious sniff of her armpit. Urgh. BO with sewer undertones. Maybe she should take him up on that.

Susie hesitated as the organ music began to play inside the nave. The doors were still open. She could just walk inside, find a seat in the corner away from other people, and see what all this Angel stuff was really about.

But instead she pulled her jacket close around her and slipped out the front door, into the cold and bright New Home City morning. She’d brought enough trouble down on the priest’s house for one day. And besides, Father Murdock was right.

Angels could only do so much for her.

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“And voila!” Doctor Gaster held out a test tube to Noelle. “I do believe that does it.”

Noelle raised her head from the desk where she’d been napping while Gaster finished mixing the formula. She scooted over on her wheeled stool, her hands shaking a little as she took the vial. Though she tried not to show it, she was exhausted. They had been working in the lab all day, just her and Gaster, analyzing the blood sample, isolating its elements, and trying to reverse-engineer a formula to reverse the effects of the original serum. Thankfully Gaster still had a sample of that - the portion Alphys had taken hadn’t been the entirety of it - so they hadn’t had to start from scratch. Even so, it had been a tricky and time-consuming task.

Now she held the fruits of their labor in her hand. “Are you certain it will work?”

“Of course not!” Gaster said, spreading his arms and grinning broadly. “It’s an experiment! And unfortunately there is only one person it can be tested on. But I will leave that part up to you, my young friend. Fighting superpowered monsters is more your area of expertise.”

Noelle smiled at the thought of the slender skeleton going up against the Alphys lizard. “Yeah, I don’t think you’d do so well.”

As tired and grumpy as she was, and as much as she disliked and distrusted Gaster, she had to admit…it had been nice, working with him like this. The camaraderie of putting their minds towards a shared goal couldn’t erase the sting of betrayal from everything he’d put her through, but it helped her pretend, for a little while, that none of that had happened. Like getting a glimpse at what her life could have been, if she’d never become Spider-Doe and had instead followed her dreams of a degree in bioengineering and a future position at Gastcorp.

She took a last look around the lab, rubbing the sleepiness out of her eyes. Part of her felt so comfortable here, in this sterile room with its polished tables and high-tech equipment, its microscopes and computer monitors. It was a place where monsterkind’s brightest minds cracked open the secrets of the world and figured out what made them tick. A place of learning and experimentation, trial and triumph. A place where things were discovered that could change the world. She’d wanted to be a part of that, not too long ago.

But there was more to the world than the calm sanctuary of science. The world was violent and dangerous and unstable, and someone needed to hold it all together. Noelle might have been able to do more good for the world in the long-term in a lab, but in the immediate here and now, she was needed swinging through the streets pulling people out of harm’s way.

So she hopped off the stool and cracked her neck, tucking the vial away in her belt under her costume. “Well, it’s been a pleasure, Doctor. I’ll let you know how it goes.”

“Not so fast, Noelle,” Gaster said, smiling pleasantly. “Our transaction is not yet finished.”

Noelle hesitated, looking inward as her Other squeezed her SOUL with threads of anxiety. **Noelle-Host, are you certain? I do not wish to do this.**

*I don’t like it either,* she told it, *but we made a deal. I need you to work with me here.*

“All right,” she told Gaster. “Got something to contain it in?”

Gaster knelt and retrieved something from a drawer along the wall of the lab: A large cylindrical glass containment tube with airtight mechanical seals on each end. “Whenever you are ready.”

“Okay, let’s see how this works…”

She held out her arm, trying to focus on commanding the Other’s black ooze, concentrating it in her palm. It began to pool there, thick like molasses, alive and writhing. Noelle tipped her palm and willed it to extend downward, like a drop of water or a squeeze of honey. It did so, dribbling out like one of the tendrils she could create, only in the shape of a large slug. It fell slowly down from her hand, the connective tissue between it and her palm growing thinner as it went, until finally it snapped, letting the blob drop the rest of the way to the ground.

As soon as it landed on the polished tile, it immediately began slithering away, moving with surprising speed. Gaster cried out in alarm, but Noelle quickly thrust her arm out and snagged it with a webline. She reeled it in, feeling slightly sick at the way it squirmed and thrashed around like a fish on a hook. She deposited it in the open end of Gaster’s containment tube, and he sealed it shut.

*How do you feel?* Noelle asked her Other as they watched the “sample” throw itself against the tube’s glass walls. It was rippling and undulating wildly, and its substance was starting to change colors, turning from jet black to an angry red; she hadn't known they could do that.

**Unsettled. I have, to put it in terms you can understand, just given birth. That is my offspring. I wonder if I have condemned it to an unhappy life.**

“Fascinating,” Gaster said, watching the trapped and trembling offshoot. “Truly fascinating.” He took it to the laboratory’s entrance and opened the door. Their security detail for the day, the bull guard Milo, was standing just outside. “Take this to the vault and secure it right away,” Gaster said, handing him the containment tube.

“Treat it well. If you hurt it, we’ll know,” Noelle warned him. “Remember, it’s a living thing. Sentient, too, and smarter than you might think. I expect you to take good care of it.”

“Do you think me cruel, Noelle? I merely want to understand it, not harm it. These creatures are unlike anything monsterkind has seen before. Will you begrudge a scientist his curiosity?”

“Not normally, no,” she told him. “But I know you, Gaster. I know what kind of recklessness your ambition will drive you to. So you’ll forgive me if I don’t trust you to always act nobly.”

Gaster sighed, and retrieved something from his lab coat’s pocket. Two small objects, white and rubbery. “Ah, Noelle. I would be hurt by your suspicion…if it did not betray a wisdom beyond your years.”

He stuffed the small objects - earplugs, she realized - into the little holes where the base of his skull met his jaw, the closest thing his body had to ears.

A sudden dread spiked inside her. *Wait.*

“I’m truly sorry about this,” Gaster said, and then he turned to the control console next to the laboratory’s door and pressed a button.

The door sealed and the cool-temperature fluorescent lights switched to the alarmed red of lockdown. Noelle barely had time to notice before she was brought to her knees by a shrill, unbearably loud whine being pumped into the room through the building’s intercom speakers. She felt the sound as a physical pain, like needles in her ears. She screamed, but it was her Other’s scream that she heard echoing in her head. Her living costume was twisting in all directions, tearing itself off of her and writhing in agony. She could feel its pain in her mind; it felt like she was being ripped into shreds.

“I studied the footage of the attack on you and Dreemurr closely,” Gaster shouted, though Noelle could barely make out the words over the sound assaulting her eardrums. “It always pays to know your enemy’s weaknesses, and that brute Raven stumbled straight into your symbiotic companion’s with that sonic weapon of his. I noticed right away the effect the sound had on it, even hidden within you as it was then.”

Noelle tried to stand, but she couldn’t. Maybe if she hadn’t been so strongly mentally linked to her Other, she could have withstood it, but their shared pain was too great. She curled up in a ball on the floor, screaming and plugging her ears, not that that did anything to spare the symbiote its agony. It was sloughing off her body like melting plastic, puddling on the floor, pulling all its mass into a twitchy, spiky ball.

“It was a simple matter to recreate the frequency used by Raven’s crude weapon,” Gaster said, “and then strengthen and amplify it. High frequencies seem to work best, though I suspect any sufficiently powerful sound wave vibrations would have a similar effect. It appears to disrupt the creature’s ability to form a cohesive bond with physical matter - ah, but I apologize. You don’t need me to explain something you’re currently experiencing first-hand.”

Noelle whimpered, convulsing on the floor, as the symbiote detached itself from her insides, retracting its tendrils from her brain and her muscles, oozing out of her blood through her nose and ears and open mouth. The last traces of it melted away off her body, leaving her clad in her old red-and-green costume that she was still wearing underneath.

She felt its screams growing quieter in her mind as it left her, ringing like a fading clamor of bells. **Noelle-Host…please…help us…**

But as the distance between them grew, so too did the pain recede. Her own pain was still present, but far more manageable in contrast. She rolled over onto her side, panting, reaching a hand out for the roiling, anguished mass of black matter.

Gaster slammed a large case of reinforced glass over it, the bottom vacuum-sealing itself, trapping the symbiote. "There we are. That should keep you from going anywhere." He pressed a button on the room's control panel again and the noise shut off, leaving Noelle gasping, an echo ringing in her ears.

"You…liar…" she panted. "How…could you?"

Gaster popped the earplugs out of his ears, looking entirely unbothered. "I'm sorry for any pain, trauma, or permanent hearing loss you may have incurred from this unfortunate incident, Noelle, but it was important that I retrieve a complete organism for my studies, and you were the only person in possession of one. You may not realize it now, but one day you'll thank me. A foolish high school girl is no fitting host for first contact with an alien race. That honor belongs to greater monsters."

The symbiote was slamming itself against the transparent wall of its enclosure nearest Noelle, as though trying frantically to reach her. Even without their bond, she thought she could sense what it was feeling. Or maybe she was just feeling the same thing, that desperate urge to be reunited with her Other.

She tried to struggle to her hooves, but her legs were as weak as a newborn fawn's. Her stomach was an empty, growling pit, and her mind was fogged by fatigue and the drowsy come-down from the adrenaline high of pain. She hadn't realized just how much the symbiote had been doing to keep her going after the last few days of no sleep and little food.

"Don't try to get up," Gaster advised her. "Take a moment to recover. Security will escort you off the premises. I wouldn't try to fight, if I were you. You look like you've been through enough for one day." He lifted the plexiglass box off the ground by its handle like a briefcase and began to walk away. "Pleasure doing business with you, Spider-Doe."

"Gaster," Noelle groaned. "Wait."

He paused just in front of the door, looking back at her.

Noelle reached for a nearby chair and used it to support her weight, hauling herself up onto her hooves. She had to lean against the table for support, but she managed to stand.

"I can't let you leave with them," she said weakly. Her fur was matted with sweat and blood from her nose, and she still felt dizzy and nauseous, but she forced herself to plant her hooves as firmly as she could and clench her fists in defiance. "I won't let you separate us."

“You can barely stand, dear girl. Look at yourself. You’re not so impressive without your little friend here, are you?” Gaster held up the case tauntingly; inside the symbiote had expanded somehow, puffing itself up to fill every inch of space in its cage. “Do yourself a favor and know when you’re beaten. Don’t make me turn the sonic back on.”

She could still faintly feel her Other straining against the confines of its prison, a strange phantom limb sensation, like she had two bodies at once. “Did you really think…you could break our bond?” she panted. “Did you think you could trap us? That we would *let you get away with that again?”*

She took a step forwards, and Gaster’s confident expression faltered. His hand reached out for the controls on the wall again, but Noelle was faster. A flick of her wrist and his hand was pinned to the wall by webbing, the controls just out of reach.

“Security!” Gaster shouted into the intercom by the door. “Security to Lab 4B, *now!”*

Noelle advanced on him. “I’ve fought my way out of this place before. I can do it again.”

“Stay back!” Gaster warned her, tugging at his stuck hand. “Don’t you dare!”

The symbiote was swelling, pressing against the box. She saw the plexiglass start to crack, and felt a surge of hope.

Gaster dropped the box in horror, but Noelle laughed. “Hahaha! You underestimated us, Doctor. Hubris…that’s always been *your* weakness. You think you can mess with forces more powerful than you are and come out unharmed.”

She clenched her fist, and with a sudden CRACK, the plexiglass prison shattered, glass flying everywhere as spikes burst from the symbiote’s balled-up form like a sea urchin. Gaster cried out, shielding his face with his hand.

“You thought you were invincible, didn’t you?” Noelle said. “Safe in your castle, where you hold all the cards.” The symbiote flowed over her - *into her* - covering her in the comforting security of its darkness and flooding her body with its strength. **“LET US DISABUSE YOU OF THAT FANTASY.”**

The door burst open and security guards began to rush into the room. Noelle raised her arm and shot out a thick, enormous mass of tendrils like the intertwined roots of a tree. It slammed into the guards like a battering ram, bowling them over.

More tendrils sprouted from her back, seizing one of the heavy pieces of machinery and slamming it against the door, blocking the entrance. An alarm started blaring, the room’s lighting drenched in bloody red, but its wail was nothing compared to that sonic scream. Her tentacles found the room’s speakers and smashed them anyway, just to be safe.

**“Just us now, Doctor.”** Her hand swelled in size, enlarged by symbiote matter, and Gaster screamed as she ripped him from the wall. She threw him away like

he weighed nothing, and he went flying across one of the work tables, shattering beakers and sending computer monitors crashing to the ground in a shower of sparks.

Noelle stalked across the room after him, her costume a furious mass of writhing tentacles. They moved of their own accord, without needing her mental command - lashing out wildly, throwing equipment that must have weighed a ton across the room and flipping over tables. Gaster was on the floor, trying to crawl away, but she sent everything between her and him flying. Within seconds, the room looked like a hurricane had passed through it. Thousands of dollars worth of equipment, destroyed. Ripped apart, reduced to sparking, smoking rubble.

It felt *good,* cutting loose like that. It felt amazing. And Gaster deserved it. After everything he'd done to them, he had this reckoning coming.

**"Betrayer! Torturer!"** she spat at him with a voice that wasn't hers. **"Every time she trusted you, you turned on her! You used her! Hurt her! Tried to SEPARATE US!"**

Gaster tried to scramble away and she delivered a kick to his chest that sent him flying, crashing against the far wall and collapsing to the floor.

She approached him, and Gaster held up his hands as though to ward her off as she loomed over him. "Think about what you're doing! You - you don't want to hurt me!"

**"But we do,"** Noelle told him. She hoisted him up by the collar, letting him look right in her costume's ghostly white eyes. **"We really, really do."**

The fear on her former mentor's face was delicious. "Spider-Doe, please! Don't do this!"

**"We're not Spider-Doe,"** she told him. She slipped a tentacle around his leg and flipped him upside down, dangling him in the air in front of her. **"Not anymore. Not to you."**

Gaster screamed, arms flailing as she waved him side to side. "You - you - what kind of devil are you? What ARE you?!"

**"We,"** Noelle smiled, **"are Vengeance."**

With a whip of her tentacle arm, she flung the screaming scientist through the air and slammed him against the floor.

**"WE ARE WHAT YOU MADE US!"** Noelle bellowed, stalking over to where he lay gasping. **"You gave us these powers! You summoned us from the darkness to serve the light! You brought us together, you and your experiments! We're like this because of YOU! BUT THAT DOESN'T MEAN YOU OWN US!"**

All of Gaster's condescension, his resentment, his entitlement…the way he spoke to her, abused her trust, treated her like his intellectual property…all of that had left a mark. She'd resisted it, but also internalized it, like ingesting trace amounts

of poison, slowly building up to a fatal heart attack. This was her chance to get that venom out of her veins, to purge the part of her heart that still wanted to make him proud of her. By any means necessary.

Gaster was splayed in a small crater of broken floor tiling, struggling to move. There was a crack along the top of his skull. Noelle crouched over him, drawing back her fist.

**"Time for one last experiment, Doctor. It's a simple one: We see how many times we can hit you before you stop moving."**

She was about to slam her fist down when Gaster stopped her with an unexpected sound: a wheezing, rattling laugh. "Ha ha ha…such magnificent power…you may have been…an accident…but you really are…my greatest discovery."

Noelle hesitated, a surge of conflicting emotions welling up in her chest.

Then something exploded, a concussive blast that blew the obstructions by the door to pieces, sending shards of the machinery flying. On instinct, Noelle quickly threw out a wall of symbiotic tendrils as a shield, ducking behind it as shrapnel flew everywhere.

It was only when she looked up again that she realized she'd made the shield large enough to shelter Gaster as well.

"Stop right there!" a commanding voice shouted. "Don't move! Step away from the Doctor and put your hands behind your head!"

Armed guards were rushing into the room, pointing guns at her. Noelle tensed, her symbiote champing at the bit, tendrils waving in the air excitedly.

**We can take them,** it thought. **We can take them all! Destroy all the evil ones that tried to trap us!**

*No!* Noelle told it. *These ones aren't evil. They're just doing their job. And we…* She looked down at Gaster, feeling sick at the sight of his cracked skull. *We've destroyed enough. I just want to leave. Please, don't hurt anyone, just…just get us out of here.*

**As you wish, Noelle-Host,** her Other said, and with an unearthly roar, it launched her body at the guards, knocking over bodies like bowling pins.

And then she was out the door and running down the hall, unstoppable, the world around her a blur of crimson alarms and screaming sirens.

Shouts rang out from behind her. Bullets whizzed past her head. Noelle kept running, until she reached the atrium. They were up on one of the high balconies looking out over the main entrance. The doors below were locked down tight, the employees no doubt hiding in their labs and offices, while a small army of private security officers secured the exit.

She could have fought them all - in that, her Other was correct. But she didn't have to.

They could lock down the doors, but they couldn't lock down every exterior window of the glass skyscraper. Noelle didn't hesitate before she dove off the balcony's edge, shooting a webline. Bullets shot past her from below as she pulled herself into a fast swing, slamming feet-first into the window and crashing through the glass.

And then she was outside, falling and swinging and soaring away into the city, triumphant and free and…and dizzy, and exhausted, and -

*I think…I'm going to pass out…for a little while,* Noelle thought. She couldn't hold on a second longer. She felt herself succumb to exhaustion, sucked down into an overpowering and long overdue sleep.

Her body kept swinging.

# Chapter 18: I'm Gonna Be Restored

Noelle awoke to the sensation of being hit very hard, flying through the air, and colliding with a stack of wooden boxes full of ice and dead fish.

“Huh…wuh?” she muttered. “Where are we, wha’s going on?”

**We are at a fish market near the harbor. We’re fighting evil!**

A ferocious roar and a flash of yellow caught her attention, and Noelle looked up to see the Alphys lizard leaping through the air towards her. It had only one arm now, but that only made it slightly less fearsome; its jaws were stained red, gory bits of half-eaten fish stuck between its sharp teeth.

“Aaah!” With a scream, she jumped ungracefully away. The lizard crashed into the crates, which exploded into splinters of wood, ice and meat. Noelle swung herself to the side of the room and perched on the wall out of reach, trying to get her bearings.

She’d never been inside the city’s famous fish market before, but it was an impressively large space: an enormously long industrial warehouse, stretching on far into the distance. It was cold inside, the floors slick with water, and the fishy smell of the place was overwhelming. All along the length of the warehouse floor were boxes and crates marked “Fresh Seafood,” display tables and fridges, rows and rows of metal trays full of ice and fresh fish, and long tables where the meat was cut and processed. Half the seafood found in restaurants and grocery stores across the entire city probably passed through this place, fresh off the fishermen’s boats.

That made it the most enticing all-you-can-eat buffet imaginable for a giant hungry lizard monster. A monster who was currently grabbing a heavy crate in one hand and throwing it at Noelle.

She jumped off the wall, attaching a webline to the steel bars in the rafters and swinging out of the way; thankfully there was plenty of open space to maneuver in this place. The crate hit the wall with a crash, spraying ice and crab shells everywhere.

*How did I get here?* Noelle demanded. *What did I miss?*

**We were swinging by the harbor on our way home when we heard screaming, and went to investigate. And we found the creature we were looking for! Now we will not have to go back to that smelly place underground.**

Noelle swung down and around in a wide arc, and delivered a kick to the back of the lizard’s head. It hit the ground and rolled, slashing at her with its claws to keep her away. Its tail lashed out, sending tables of cut meat clattering to the ground.

*I thought we agreed on this! You can't just take control of my body and get into fights without me!*

**Apologies, Noelle-Host. You were unconscious. Your body was pushed to its limits. I was going to take you home, so you could rest, but then decided I would try and handle this emergency without having to wake you.** Its voice in her head sounded a bit hurt, like a kid who tries to make you a present and gets upset when you don't like it. **I thought you would be proud of me if I took care of it.**

Noelle tried to shake off her grogginess. She'd pushed herself to the point of fainting, and it sounded like she'd only been able to sleep for a few minutes. *Well we're here now, and we did need to fight her sooner or later. Where is everybody? Did Alphys hurt anyone?*

**The people all fled at the sight of it. I don't think it ate anyone. It was more interested in the fish.**

*All right.* At least she could get this crossed off her to-do list sooner rather than later. She pressed a hand to the belt around her waist, checking that the vial of anti-lizard serum was still intact. Thankfully it felt undamaged. *We need to get this serum down its throat.*

**I will subdue it for you,** her Other assured her. **You just need to get close enough.**

The lizard tossed another crate at her, but Noelle's Other caught it with their tendrils and threw it harmlessly away.

"Two can play at that game," Noelle grunted, and willed the tendrils to wrap around a nearby forklift. With a slight strain, they lifted the heavy vehicle over their head, balanced on a web of black tentacles extending from her body.

The lizard roared in challenge and lunged for her, leaping into the air. Noelle swung the forklift like a club, catching it in the side as it pounced. It went careening away and slammed into the wall.

Noelle dropped the forklift with an echoing crash and swung over to where the lizard had fallen. It was stunned but already righting itself, clambering to its feet. She landed a short distance away and began shooting webbing blasts at it, pinning its single arm to the wall. The lizard screeched and strained against its bonds.

Noelle took a moment to catch her breath. Though the creature's legs were kicking and its tail thrashing, it couldn't do much while stuck to the wall. And with only one arm to worry about, it shouldn't be too hard to get up there and force it to swallow the contents of the vial. Just had to watch out for those snapping teeth.

But then she heard a crumbling, cracking sound, and looked up in horror to see the lizard wrench its arm free, not by breaking the webbing but by ripping an entire chunk of wall out with it.

“Should have known that would be too easy,” Noelle groaned. “Come on and fight me then!”

The lizard roared and charged at her, and she ran to meet it, falling into a slide along the wet floor at the last minute and slipping right underneath its slashing claw and between its legs. She wrapped her arms around the monster’s thick tail and stood, with some help from her symbiote sprouting tendrils from her back to push her upright out of her slide.

The tail thrashed and flailed in her arms, trying to escape her grasp. It was almost too big and strong to hold onto, but Noelle’s hooves were stuck fast to the floor and she refused to be uprooted. Instead, she threw its tail over her shoulder and jumped to the wall. She ran straight up the wall, straining her superpowered muscles as she hoisted the lizard off the ground by its tail behind her.

It screeched and clawed at the wall, trying to find purchase, but it was too late to stop her momentum. She ran as far up as she could, then leapt off the wall and into the air. With a yell, Noelle flipped the creature right over her head as she fell and slammed it down against the floor.

She landed in a crouch on top of its underbelly. *Now, while it’s stunned! Hold it down!*

Her Other’s tendrils hastened to obey, wrapping themselves around the lizard’s limbs, keeping it pinned so it couldn’t flip itself over. Noelle approached its head. The beast snapped its jaws at her, a predatory growl coming from between its sharp, red-stained teeth.

*Hold its mouth open,* Noelle ordered. Tentacles sprouted from her chest, wrapping themselves between the creature’s teeth and forcing its jaw open. It thrashed its head and growled, but the tentacles held it fast.

“I know you’re still in there, Alphys. Just stay calm, okay? It will be over soon.” Noelle took the vial from her belt and unstopped the lid. “Here’s hoping this works and Gaster didn’t screw us over.”

She reached her arm into the lizard’s mouth and poured the serum directly down its gullet.

For a long, tense moment, nothing seemed to happen. And then the monster began to shake and thrash, its body convulsing like someone having a seizure. Noelle leapt off its chest, willing her Other to retract their tentacles.

The lizard writhed on the damp concrete floor, roaring in pain, its limbs jerking, the bones making unnatural cracking noises.

Noelle felt a surge of panic, afraid that something was wrong, that the serum was killing it. But then she noticed that not only was its body convulsing, it seemed to be shrinking in size. Before her eyes, its tail shrank down, the spikes on its back receding into its spine. Its sharp maw of fangs morphed into buck teeth, and its claws retracted and shrank into normal, stubby-fingered hands.

Seconds later, Alphys lay there coughing, curled into a ball. She was naked, her tail curled between her scaly legs. Despite the incredible transformation, she was still missing her arm, although the flesh of the stump had sealed over.

Noelle approached her cautiously, retracting her mask so Alphys wouldn't be scared. "Ms. Alphys? Are you…yourself again?"

She glanced around for something to cover the reptile woman with, and her gaze fell on a meat cutter's discarded apron on a table nearby. Noelle grabbed it and draped it over her teacher. A poor makeshift version of a shock blanket, but it would have to do.

Alphys turned her head to look up at Noelle kneeling over her. There was confusion in her eyes, but also, thankfully, recognition. "N-Noelle? Is…that you?"

"Yeah, it's me! Are you okay? I mean, are you…yourself again?"

"I th-think so… Noelle, I think I did something t-terrible…" Alphys tried to move her left arm towards her face, but it ended just above the elbow. "Oh no, no no no…my arm! Wh-where's my arm?!"

"I'm sorry!" Noelle told her. "I'm so sorry, Ms. Alphys, but I had no choice. I had to stop you, *save* you, before you…before you hurt anyone."

Alphys's eyes went wide. "Did…d-did I…?"

"No! At least, I don't think so. Nobody got hurt."

"B-but I remember," Alphys said, her voice quivering. "Berdly and Martlet and Susie were th-there. I tried to…I nearly… Oh Angel, I couldn't *think.* Everything was - was *smells* and *sounds* and I was so…so *hungry.* "

"It's okay!" Noelle reassured her, helping her sit up. "It's over now. You're going to be okay."

"What have I done?" Alphys cried, tears welling up in her eyes. "What have I *done?* I just wanted to be like y-you and K-Kris. I just wanted to be a h-hero…"

Noelle hugged her teacher, feeling more like a parent than a student as Alphys sniffled and sobbed. Her insides felt all twisted up by Alphys's words. Why did everyone want to be like her? Why did they have to destroy themselves trying?

She was no role model. She barely even felt like a hero anymore, if she'd ever even really been one. She was just doing her best, trying to offer people protection in a dangerous world. But lately it felt like she couldn't even manage to protect people from themselves.

She should feel proud of herself. She had just saved someone, fixed something. Put things right, like she'd wanted.

But on the inside, she just felt tired and sad.

“Come on, Ms. Alphys,” she said, gently lifting the yellow-scaled monster in her arms. “Let me take you to the hospital, make sure you’re okay. Everything is going to be just fine.”

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“Ms. Alphys?” Kris called softly, pushing the door to the hospital room slowly open. “Are you awake? It’s me, Kris.”

They weren’t supposed to be out of bed. After Noelle had left that morning, and after their family had been by to see them, they’d spent the rest of the day either sleeping fitfully or tossing and turning, feeling sad and frustrated and cooped-up in bed. They were still too weak to be discharged immediately, so they were stuck here in the hospital for the time being, but they just wanted to get back to their normal life.

They were worried about Noelle, too. She wasn’t answering their texts. It was hard not to keep replaying their argument with her over and over in their head, and the more they did, the more they worried that something was wrong with her. There was something disturbing about that strange new costume…

When Berdly and Martlet had arrived that evening, both to check up on Kris and to bring word that Noelle had just admitted Alphys to that same hospital, the three of them decided to go see how their teacher was doing. The bluebirds had filled Kris in on what they’d missed; apparently a lot had happened to Alphys while they’d been asleep. Maybe she’d be able to shed some light on what was going on with Noelle, too, if Spider-Doe had just saved her.

They stepped inside Alphys’s room, wheeling their IV stand along next to them for support; Kris felt a little stronger now, but it was still hard to walk unaided. Berdly and Martlet followed, sticking close to Kris.

Alphys was curled up on her side in the bed, dressed in the same type of thin hospital gown as Kris was wearing. She was similarly hooked up to an IV and heart monitor as well. She was awake though, and at the sound of them entering she turned her head to look up at Kris in surprise. “K-Kris? You’re awake! I hadn’t h-heard.”

“Yup, I’m back in action,” Kris said, though in truth their body was stiff and sore and they felt tired just from walking down the hall. “I’m fine, don’t worry about me. Just came to see how you’re doing.”

Alphys smiled thinly. “Th-thank you, Kris. It’s sweet of you to c-care…”

“Noelle told us how she cured you,” Berdly said. “And listen, no hard feelings for trying to eat us. We know it wasn’t your fault.”

Kris held down a slight twinge of resentment that Noelle was too busy to reply to their texts but had time to send Berdly an update. Then again, she hadn’t even

gotten around to telling them about the Alphys situation when they spoke, while Berdly and Martlet had apparently been right in the thick of it.

"We're really glad to see you're okay!" Martlet added, but then Alphys sat up straighter and Martlet almost choked and added, "Er, I mean, okay-ish…"

Alphys was missing an arm. One sleeve of the hospital gown hung limply at her side.

"Ms. Alphys," Kris said, pulling up a chair to sit next to her bedside, "what happened to your arm?"

"Um, Spider-Doe happened…" Martlet answered for her.

Kris looked at her, aghast. *"Noelle* did that to her? And you didn't think that was important to mention?"

"We hoped her arm would regrow when she changed back!" Berdly chittered. "Because she's a lizard, and they can regrow limbs."

"Only their t-tails," Alphys said. "And not all types of lizard monsters can. It's a c-common misconception…" She gave a dark little laugh and added, "I should put that on the next biology q-quiz."

"I'm so sorry, Alphys," Martlet chirped morosely. "We tried to help you, but…we didn't really do any good, did we?"

"It's okay," Alphys said. "You kids did more than I deserved. This was all my f-fault." She looked down at her empty sleeve. "It'll make a good reminder to not be so stupid in the future…"

"Just means I'll need to step up a bit more as your TA, right?" Kris said, trying to lighten the mood a little.

Alphys hung her head. "That's assuming I still have a job…"

"Hey, don't say that. I'll talk to my mom. I'm sure you can work something out."

Alphys sniffled a little. "Th-thanks, Kris. You and Noelle have done so m-much for me. You're the real heroes…"

"Can we backtrack to the part where Noelle cut your arm off, though?" Kris said. "I'm sorry, I just…it doesn't sound like something she would do."

"I'm sure I left her no choice…" Alphys said. "I was out of control, dangerous. I could have k-killed someone! But she stopped me, cured me. I would still be that…that *thing* if it weren't for her. I owe her for that…"

"Why did you do it, Alphys?" Kris asked. "Why would you test something like that on yourself, without knowing what could happen?"

Alphys looked down at her lap sheepishly. "Don't t-take this the wrong way, Kris, but…I did it because of you."

“What? What do you mean, because of me?”

“Because you were hurt,” Alphys croaked. “You and Noelle…you’re amazing, but…you’re still just kids. And I’ve s-seen the toll it takes on you two, having all that p-power and being responsible for keeping the city safe. I thought, maybe if you weren’t alone, maybe if more people had powers, then you wouldn’t have to do everything yourself. You could have a n-normal life…”

Kris looked away, their eyes hidden behind their hair, a lump building in their throat. When they raised their head again, it was to address Berdly and Martlet. “Would you two mind giving us the room for a minute?”

Berdly opened his beak, but Martlet gave his wing a gentle tug. “Come on, Berdly. Let’s give them some space.”

When they’d stepped outside, Kris turned back to Alphys. “That’s not the whole story, is it?”

Alphys wilted a little under their gaze. “No…” she admitted in a small voice.

“You wanted powers. You wanted to feel strong. To feel like someone important.”

Alphys nodded, sniffling.

Kris’s heart clenched tight in their chest. “You wanted to be like me.”

“Y-Yes…”

Kris gripped the sides of their head, burying their fingers in their hair. “God damn it, Alphys! Why would you do that?”

“I t-told you,” Alphys stammered. “You almost got k-killed and I thought -”

“You thought ‘that should have been me instead’? You really looked at my life and said, hey, sign me up for some of that?”

“I just thought -” Alphys said. “I…I don’t know what I thought. I was being a fool…”

Kris pressed their palms against their eyes. “This is exactly why I can’t be Spider-Human anymore. It’s all gotten too big.”

“What - what do you mean, Kris?”

“I didn’t know what I was starting,” Kris groaned. God, it seemed so obvious now, so clear in hindsight. “I was like you. I just wanted to do something good, and now - now it’s all out of my control.”

“Kris…” Alphys said seriously. “You’re being too h-hard on yourself. You’ve done a *lot* of good. You’ve helped people. Inspired so many…”

“Inspired them to do *what,* Alphys? I’ve inspired Noelle to risk her life every day. I inspired you to hurt yourself. And for what? Because people want to be like me? *I* don’t even want to be like me!”

“D-Don’t say that!” Alphys squeaked. “You’re a really g-good kid, Kris. If I had k-kids, I’d want them to be like you.”

Kris looked at her skeptically. “You’d want them to risk their lives fighting supervillains?”

“W-Well, maybe not *exactly* like that…but I’d want them to be brave and kind like you. Even before everyone found out you were a hero, you were always really n-nice to have in class. Quiet but p-polite, and always helping your classmates and standing up to b-bullies. You’ve always looked after people. That’s just who you are.”

“And what does that make me if I can’t do that anymore? If I can’t be Spider-Human, but I can’t just be Kris either?”

“Listen, Kris…I’ve read a lot of comic books, and if there’s one thing I’ve learned, it’s that being a hero is about more than a c-costume. The real power is in your SOUL! M-Metaphorically I mean, though for a human, maybe also literally?”

Kris narrowed their eyes at her. “No offense, Alphys, but maybe you should have remembered that earlier.”

Alphys hung her head, looking sheepish. “G-Geez, Kris, kick me while I’m down, why don’t you…”

“You know, it was stupid but I get why you did it. I know that feeling, like I’m never good enough. Like I’m always missing something, this *one thing* that will make me finally feel like…” They heaved a sigh, wrapping their arms tight around their chest. “Like I know who I’m supposed to be.”

Alphys chuckled warmly. “You’re s-still growing up, Kris. No one knows who they’re supposed to be at your age. And even if you did, you’d probably end up being wrong… You never know where life is going to take you.”

“I guess,” Kris admitted. “Kinda feel like I have more problems than other teenagers, though. Most kids my age don’t have supervillains trying to kill them. Except for Noelle, now…”

“Have you talked to Noelle about this?”

“Yeah…we, um, kind of had a fight about it. Right after I woke up.”

“Kris!” Alphys said. “You two shouldn’t be fighting! You need each other! It’s like in this one anime, Mighty Transforming Teen Super Commandos, where they -”

“Please don’t start,” Kris interrupted. “Life isn’t a cartoon or a comic, Alphys. I’m being serious here.”

“So am I!” Alphys said passionately. “You would understand if you watched the show, it’s actually a really deep exploration of the healing power of friendship and unconditional love, I really recommend it, even though it kind of jumped the shark in the third season when they introduced a love triangle with a talking animal companion, and then it got canceled, and then there was a reboot movie a few years later but it sucked and that pretty much killed the fandom, BUT THE FIRST SEASON IS A MASTERPIECE AND -” She cut off to come up for air while Kris glared at her. “Um, I’m just saying…you should talk to Noelle.”

“Yeah… I’ll try. There’s a lot going on with her too, and we haven’t really had the chance to talk about it.”

“Whatever it is, you’ll work it out!” Alphys insisted. “You *have to.* You two are perfect for each other, you need to stay together no matter what!”

“Woah, settle down there, shipper,” Kris said, getting to their feet. “You can read about it in the tabloids with the rest of the fangirls, yeah?”

“S-Sorry, I just - I think you and Noelle are really good for each other, you know?”

“We are,” Kris agreed. “Or…I thought we were. I don’t know anymore.” They turned to go, blinking back tears as they wheeled their IV stand back to the door, leaning on it and feeling worn down and frail.

“K-Kris?” Alphys said.

They paused on their way out. “Yeah?”

“I’m gonna be a m-mess without my TA this semester. I’ll s-see you at school again soon, right?”

They smiled lightly. “Right. See you then, Alphys. Thanks for the talk.”

Berdly and Martlet were still waiting for them outside. Together they helped Kris walk back to their room. By the time they got there, Kris’s energy was wiped out, so they thanked their friends and told them they needed to sleep for a while. Berdly made them promise to text him tomorrow, and Martlet wished them a fast recovery and said that it wasn’t the same at school without them. And then they were gone, and Kris was alone again.

They took their phone off the charger on the nightstand next to their bed and checked for new texts from Noelle. Nothing.

They should call her. She probably wouldn’t pick up, but they could try.

And if she did pick up, what would they say? They wanted to ask her if she was okay, but they weren’t sure if they’d get an honest answer. They wanted to say that they weren’t giving up on her, on their relationship, but they didn’t know how to mend the cracks they could see forming.

They wanted to tell her so many things, but they were so tired, and they couldn’t find the words.

Still, they tried. They wrote out another text, a long one. They wrote it and deleted it and rewrote it again, thinking hard about every word, obsessing over how every piece of punctuation could come across.

But in the end, they put their phone down and closed their eyes and fell asleep, without having sent anything at all.

****

Noelle felt on the verge of passing out again by the time she returned home. She hadn't even *been* home in days now. She'd been ignoring her mother's calls, Kris's texts, her sister's DMs. There had just been too much to do. Only now, with the threats resolved and everyone safe, did she feel like she could afford to rest.

There would always be more trouble, but it could wait until she'd slept.

She'd been worried there would be a lecture waiting for her when she returned, but it looked like she had beaten her mom home. Good. Maybe she could get some food and get to bed before her mom even realized she was back.

She hit up the kitchen first. She felt far too tired to cook anything, but she was able to scrounge up some frozen pizza from the fridge. Not much of a meal, but she had barely eaten in days, so she wasn't about to be choosy. She just needed something to keep her going until morning.

As Noelle ate, she listened to the muffled thudding beat of Dess's music from the floor above her. She'd often found her sister's tendency to turn her music up loud annoying in the past, but now it seemed to have a comforting familiarity to it. She wondered how Dess was holding up, stuck here at home while Noelle had been out getting into trouble. She was glad her sister was safe, but they hadn't had much time to talk recently, and Dess was probably feeling a bit neglected. Noelle should check in with her before going to bed.

First, though, she needed a shower. As exhausted as she was, her aching muscles demanded relief that only hot water could provide.

20 minutes later, toweled dry, fur fluffed, and having swapped her sweat-stained costume out for comfy pajamas, Noelle was feeling much more alive. Still foggy-brained and bleary-eyed, but less like she was about to collapse.

So before she headed to bed, she knocked on Dess's door.

"Yeah, coming! One sec!" her sister's voice shouted. The music shut off, and the door opened to reveal Dess in one of the sweat pants and tank top combos that were all she ever seemed to wear these days. "What is it - oh! Hey, Noelle!" She looked relieved. "Thought you were Mom coming to tell me to keep it down again."

Noelle rubbed the back of her neck. She hadn't even spared a thought for poor Dess, left alone to deal with their mom. Carol probably hadn't been in the best of moods since their fight in Kris's hospital room the other day. "She's been giving you a hard time?"

"No more than usual," Dess shrugged. "I've got a thick skin for it, don't worry. Anyway, who cares about that? I've been worried about you! How are you doing? You look awful."

Noelle's posture drooped pathetically. "I do? But I just showered…"

"Hey, don't take it personal, Elly. I just mean you look tired is all. Come in and take a load off." She took Noelle by the arm and practically dragged her inside. Dess's room was as dim and messy as always, lit only by an orange lava lamp on her bedside table and the ever-present glow of her PC monitor. "Want some weed?"

Noelle blinked. "Do I *what?"*

"Weed," Dess repeated, rummaging through the lowest drawer of the dresser inside her long closet - whatever organizational system she used for that thing was incomprehensible to anyone else. "Mary Jane? The Devil's Lettuce? You know, marijuana."

"I know what it is!" Noelle protested. "Does *Mom* know you have that?"

"Sure she does," Dess said. "She just doesn't know where, so don't be a narc. 'Sides, it's legal in NHC." She pulled out a glass bong and a lighter. "I may be a criminal, but not for drug stuff."

"You're not a *criminal,"* Noelle muttered. That felt like too dirty of a word for her big sister. Although Dess did love dirty words.

"Right, of course," Dess grinned, sticking her leg out to show off the electronic bracelet around her ankle. "I just wear this for show."

"You haven't been convicted of anything yet." She was too tired to talk in circles like this. Nor did she really want to think about Dess's up-in-the-air legal fate right now.

"Well, if you want to testify at the trial that I'm a good person who just got mixed up in the wrong crowd, I'm sure you could drum up some sympathy for me with the jury."

"I don't know if I'd be the best character witness," Noelle sighed, sitting down on the edge of Dess's bed.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Dess asked. "You're like, the purest person I know." She waved the bong at Noelle. "I can't even get you to smoke a little weed for Angel's sake!"

"I just…" Noelle grasped for the words, watching the orange blobs of the lava lamp floating around, separating and merging. That semi-solid fluidity reminded

her of her Other. The thing she'd allowed inside her body and mind, without even really knowing what it was.

Right now it lay dormant. Resting, after the excitement of the fight with Alphys; even it needed to sleep sometimes. But she could still feel it inside her, curled around her SOUL like a thick layer of paint over a light bulb. When she'd first bonded with it, she'd been too curious to be frightened, and after what had happened to her and Kris, its power - its company - had felt necessary to keep her going. But now, with her enemies defeated and the danger behind her, she was beginning to wonder just what price her new companion was exacting for their services.

"I don't think I've been a very good hero lately," she admitted in a small, quiet voice.

"Oof, hero stuff, huh?" Dess said. "I'm definitely going to need to be high for this talk. You sure you don't want some? It'll help you unwind."

Noelle, whose only knowledge of drug use came from her high school health class, looked at the bong like it might bite her. "I don't know, Dess…"

"Come on, let me show you how it's done. It's not as scary as it looks."

"This is peer pressure," Noelle pouted. "You're peer pressuring me."

"Hell yeah I am," Dess grinned. "I'm your big sister, I'm allowed."

Noelle screwed up her face, considering. "Will it help me sleep?" As tired as her body was, her mind was so *full.* A sleep aid might be useful tonight.

"Yeah, probably," Dess said. "It'll mellow you out, help relax you. You seem pretty tense." She rubbed Noelle's shoulder, which felt so nice that Noelle made a little *mmmh* noise and leaned into her sister.

"Fine, I'll give it a try," Noelle said, "on one condition, which is that you keep rubbing my shoulders like that."

Dess laughed and ruffled Noelle's hair. "Yes! Totally! Whatever you want, Elly, you won't regret it."

"You're way too excited about corrupting me," Noelle grumbled, but it was hard to complain with Dess's thumbs rubbing out the tension knots in her shoulders, making her melt as she slowly let herself relax for the first time in days.

"Corrupting?" Dess teased. "I know I'm a bad influence, but it's not that big a deal, trust me. Everything's always so black and white with you, Elly."

"Mmm…you don't know the half of it."

"So tell me more," Dess said. "But first, a quick crash course in Druggie 101 for you."

She showed Noelle how to use the bong, which, like she'd said, was a little less complicated than it looked. All that shiny, elaborately twisted glass was mainly decorative. The tricky part was actually taking a hit, and only because it made Noelle cough. Dess was nice and didn't laugh though, just gave her some tips for how to breathe through it.

When Dess deemed she'd done sufficiently well, she took the bong back from Noelle, took a few hits of her own, and then flopped down on her bed, patting the mattress to encourage Noelle to lie down next to her. Noelle did so, looking up at the ceiling and focusing on her breathing. She felt…light, woozy, really sleepy still, but also a little calmer. Like she could let her thoughts drift like bubbles in the air, instead of blasting through her brain like bullets from a chamber.

"Now then," Dess said. "Tell me what's on your mind?"

Noelle was silent for a few seconds - or was it minutes, it was starting to feel hard to tell - trying to catch one of those bubbles in her mind. "I haven't felt like myself lately."

"Because of Spider-Doe?"

"Yes and no. Spider-Doe hasn't been herself either."

"What do you mean?"

Noelle paused to consider it. "I think I'm becoming somebody else. Again."

"I mean," Dess said slowly, "when you think about it, we're all becoming somebody else like, every second of every day."

"Yeahhh…" Noelle said. That was a really good point. Dess was so smart. "That's not what I'm talking about, though. I mean literally someone else."

"Woah. Literally? Like *literally* literally?"

"Stop saying literally," Noelle complained, batting ineffectively at her sister while Dess giggled. "You're making it not sound like a word anymore."

"Hey, your fault for having such a big vocabulary."

"What? That's not even a - a rare word!"

"Nevermind that, dictionary girl," Dess said. "We're getting distracted. You were saying about your identity and stuff?"

"Oh yeah. I just don't know who I am right now. It feels like…" Noelle took a long moment to think. Those thought bubbles were floating all over the place. "I still want to be a hero but I don't know what that means anymore."

"Sounds hard."

"It is. Me and Kris had a fight about it." She propped herself up on her elbow to look at Dess, realizing something. "Wait, you know Kris woke up, right?"

“Uh-huh,” Dess nodded. “Heard about it from Asriel.”

“Oh, right. Sorry I didn’t tell you sooner. There's been so much going on…” Noelle flopped down on her back again, because sitting up was making her dizzy.

“It’s okay. Just glad the little dork’s gonna pull through. What were you fighting with them about?”

Noelle took a deep breath. The argument wasn’t a happy memory to recall. “They don’t want me to be Spider-Doe anymore. Had the same fight with Mom, actually. They think it would be safer if we quit.”

“But that’s not what you want?”

“I…” Noelle stopped short, thinking hard. What *did* she want? To help the city? To protect people? To keep running herself ragged cleaning up other people’s messes? To keep beating evil people into submission for the rest of her life, until one of them got lucky and killed her?

What she finally settled on saying was, “I don’t know. I don’t think I have a choice.”

“What?” Dess scoffed. “Of course you do, Elly. You can do whatever you want.”

Noelle gave her a side-eyed glance. “Did you have a choice when you were working for Kingpin?”

Dess opened her mouth. Closed it again. Huffed and said, “That was different. No one’s forcing you to be Spider-Doe, ‘cept maybe yourself.”

“People need me, though. I can’t just stop. I just wish…I wish Kris understood.”

“Give them time, Elly,” Dess said. “They’ve just been through some serious shit. Probably not thinking straight. Give them a bit to get their head right and try again. I’m sure they’ll come around.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right. Thanks, Dess.” Noelle nudged her head against her sister’s, knocking antlers with Dess lightly. “I should have talked to you earlier. Sorry I’ve been a bad sister. I was too busy getting revenge and stuff.”

“Revenge?” Dess said. “That sounds kinda hardcore for you. Didn’t think you were the revenge type.”

“I am when someone hurts people I love,” Noelle said darkly.

She clenched her fist reflexively, but Dess’s hand cupped it and gave Noelle’s hand a squeeze. “I know the feeling,” she said.

Her tone had a knowing, far-off note to it, and Noelle knew she was thinking about all the things she’d done to try and track down their father’s killer. Dess had been the one who took action then while Noelle had tried to carry on with her life, but maybe Noelle shared more of that same thirst for vengeance than she

had admitted at the time. She just hadn't had the power to do anything about it back then.

Still, whatever darkness Dess had in her heart, Noelle had eclipsed it by now.

"I've hurt people too," she admitted, her voice choking up in shame.

Dess was quiet by her side for a moment, then asked, "Did they deserve it?"

"They needed to be stopped. But Dess…" She rolled over to look at her sister's eyes, big brown pools in the orange light. "I almost went too far. There's something in me that…that *wanted* to hurt them. Something I never used to have. Something *angry."*

"We all get angry sometimes," Dess sighed. "I'm angry a lot, too."

"Not like this," Noelle insisted. "This is something else." She hesitated, a scary question on the tip of her tongue, like an unpleasant taste that you just had to spit out. "Dess…am I a good person?"

"Whaaat?" Dess frowned. "'Course you are. What kind of question is that?"

But Noelle wasn't so easily reassured. She was just struggling to find the words to express how unsettled she'd been. "Good people… heroes… don't feel the things I've been feeling."

"Well maybe you're an antihero, then," Dess offered. "Those are way cooler anyways."

"I don't think I want to be an anti anything."

"Heh, you're right, being all dark and edgy is more my thing," Dess grinned. But then she placed a hand on the side of Noelle's face and her expression grew more serious, her bloodshot eyes focusing intently. "Listen. You're a good person, Noelle. The best person I know. It's okay to have…darker emotions sometimes. They don't have to define who you are. Don't let anyone else tell you who you should be or what to do, okay? Just follow your heart and you'll be fine."

Upset as she was, Noelle still couldn't help but smile. "Follow my heart? Dess, I think that's the cheesiest thing I've ever heard you say."

"Shuddup," Dess snorted, half-heartedly pushing her away. "I get stupid when I'm hiiiigh!"

"I think I do, too," Noelle grinned. "Thanks, though. I really needed this."

"Anytime, Elly," Dess said, pulling her into a hug. "You know I'm always here for you."

Noelle felt warm and, for the first time in a while, good. Not great. Not free of all her worries. But good. Good enough to make everything else feel a little less scary.

She was also fading fast, her eyelids drooping. “Can I…sleep here with you tonight?”

“Aw,” Dess said, “like when you were a fawn and you’d get scared by a thunderstorm?”

“Yeah,” Noelle said sleepily. “I just don’t want to be alone right now…”

***You’re never alone anymore,*** a little voice inside her said. She couldn’t tell if it was her own voice or *theirs,* but the thought made her heart stop beating for a split-second, the fur on the back of her neck bristling.

But Dess was here, so she didn’t have to be afraid. “Of course you can sleep here, Elly,” Dess said, scooting over and pulling up the blanket so Noelle could crawl under the covers. “You look like you could use it. Don’t worry, I’ll be right here all night.”

“Thanks, Dess…” Noelle murmured. As soon as her head was on the pillow, she yawned and felt her bubbly thoughts floating out of reach. “Love you…”

Dess mussed Noelle’s hair gently, then sat beside her petting her head while she drifted off. “Love you too, sis.”

****

Dess lay in her bed on her phone, the brightness turned down so that Noelle wouldn’t be kept up by the screen’s glow. Not that there was much chance of that - her sister was out like a light. She twitched and whimpered disturbingly in her sleep, but she didn’t wake, and Dess didn’t have the heart to wake her up, nightmares or no.

She herself wasn’t sleepy. She’d been on a nocturnal sleep schedule for a long time now, and house arrest hadn’t helped. She was happy to stay by Noelle’s side and watch over her, but she wasn’t going to join her sister in dreamland just yet.

Hence the phone. Dess had sent a quick text to her mom to let her know that Noelle was home and sleeping in her room with her, but don’t knock when you get back because she’s out cold already and really needs her sleep, you can argue with her in the morning. Dess had absorbed an earful - two ears, really - of Carol’s grievances about Noelle’s behavior recently, so she was hoping their mom would be relieved enough just to know where Noelle was that she’d save the arguments and punishments for another day.

Dess was relieved to have Noelle home, too, but that didn’t mean everything was all better now. She was still worried about her sister’s safety. All that stuff Noelle had been saying about becoming someone else and hurting people was disturbing, but aside from a bit of sisterly support, she didn’t know how to help. The real problems were outside the four walls of their house, and Dess couldn’t do a damn thing about them from in here.

Noelle needed support, but not just at home. And Dess…Dess still needed her freedom.

She scrolled through her phone, clearing out channel notifications on her Discord server and trying to move as little as possible while Noelle remained curled up, facing away from her. She'd been planning on doing a stream this evening, but Noelle's sleep was more important, so she'd have to let her server members know it was canceled. At least she had an adorable excuse!

She was just drafting a message explaining the situation when an icon popped up in her DMs: A clown face, with a big red 1 next to it.

This was a message she'd been impatiently anticipating for days, but seeing it pop up now of all times made her anxious. She thumbed over to the private message, eager to see what it said.

ChaosRevolver: THE TIME HAS NEARLY COME, COME. MEET WITH US TOMORROW NIGHT, AND THE JOB WILL BE BEGUN.

WinterFestival69: Even for you that rhyme was a stretch. What's the job? I've been waiting all weekend and I still don't know what you want me to do. Really gonna keep me in suspense here?

ChaosRevolver: AFTER SUNDOWN, COME AND SEE. UNTIL THEN IT MUST REMAIN A MYSTERY!

WinterFestival69: Fine. I'll be there. But this better be worth the wait.

She set her phone down and heaved a sigh, looking at Noelle next to her. Her little sister's golden hair cascaded across the pillow like streams flowing from a waterfall, her shoulders hunched up under the blanket. She never used to sleep all tensed up like that. Even in sleep, she couldn't seem to relax.

Noelle clearly had a lot weighing on her shoulders. She felt scared and alone, angry and overwhelmed. Supervillains were lurking around every corner, and Kris was going to be stuck in the hospital for a while longer. And Dess was stuck at home - or at least, she was supposed to be. But she'd never been very good at doing what she was supposed to.

The city needed its heroes, but Noelle couldn't do everything alone.

So maybe it would have to settle for an antihero instead.

# Chapter 19: The Heist

Dess was flying.

Well, okay, no she wasn't. She was breaking into a high-security corporate manufacturing plant to steal top-secret proprietary technology, and her hooves were firmly planted on the ground. But it *felt* like she was flying. That thrill of being on the job again, being out in the world going where she wasn't supposed to and taking whatever she wanted, the *lift* that danger seemed to give her SOUL - after so many long weeks stuck at home like a bird in a cage, the return to thieving made her feel light and limber and unstoppable.

Tinkerer certainly hadn't started her out with an easy assignment, either. She supposed she should consider that a compliment, a testament to her skills. She had tackled big jobs like this before. She'd even broken into Gastcorp once, and she made it out of that one…albeit without the item she'd been there to steal… and after causing a massive explosion…and accidentally giving her little sister superpowers.

The point was, she was up for a challenge! But that didn't change the fact that she should probably have her head examined for breaking into Stark Industries like this.

Stealing from Norman Gaster was one thing; he was just a nerdy millionaire scientist. A successful one, yeah, but still just a guy who spent his days splicing genes together in a lab or whatever. Chujin Stark, on the other hand, was a major-league player. A world-famous inventor and weapons manufacturer, his government contracts and cutting-edge technological innovations had made him not just Gastcorp's biggest competitor, but one of the wealthiest and most influential monsters in the world. And that wasn't even the most impressive thing about him.

In other words, he wasn't a guy most people dared try and steal from. Forget house arrest: If she got caught here, she'd probably end up locked away in some government black site super-prison or something. Bye bye, basic monster rights.

*This is crazy,* she thought as she cut through a chain-link fence surrounding the compound with a weird but insanely cool laser knife that Tinkerer had lent her. They had all kinds of useful gadgets like that but high-tech help or not, she was insane for taking such a big risk. And for what? A taste of adventure? A chance to feel free again, at the cost of risking what freedom she still had left? She wanted to get out in the world so she could help Noelle fight crime, but if she wasn't careful, she'd get caught and it would all end up being for nothing.

Well, it was too late to have second thoughts now. Dess may have been an idiot, but no one could say she wasn't a committed one.

At least she didn't have to figure out the whole thing on her own. She dug the transparent crystal shard Tinkerer had given her out of the pocket of her costume

and spoke into it. “I’ve breached the perimeter. Where to now?”

“Main building, straight ahead. If the blueprints I acquired are correct, the vault should be on the basement level. If the artifact is anywhere, it will be there,” Seam’s voice echoed through the glassy surface of the shard somehow. Dess didn’t understand it, but the thing they’d called a Shadow Crystal had more uses than it appeared at first glance, and one of them was as a two-way communicator. She still thought that was a bit redundant in this day and age, but probably communications by magic crystal were more secure. Plus you didn't need a cell signal.

“And you’re sure the security cameras won’t pick me up?” she asked again. Seam had explained it to her, but it didn’t really make a lot of sense.

An giggling voice echoed up from the crystal. “TRY IT OUT AND YOU WILL SEE, SEE! THE POWER OF MAGICAL INVISIBILITY!”

“Get off me, Jevil!” Seam’s voice snapped. “I am trying to speak to December.” They huffed and added, “As I was about to explain, the Crystal emits an energy that interferes with electromagnetic fields and should temporarily distort any cameras in the vicinity. So long as you have it on your person you are effectively a walking blind spot.”

“You better be right about that. You know, I still don’t see why you can’t do this stuff yourself if you have so many gadgets to make it easier.” Unless, of course, Seam needed someone expendable to take the fall in their place if it went wrong.

“Hehe heh hah.” The weird cat’s muffled laugh echoed up from the crystal unnervingly. “I am an old monster, December. My skills are not what they used to be. No, I’m afraid these days, I require good assistants.”

Dess moved cautiously but quickly around the fenceline, letting her black bodysuit blend into the shadows as she crept her way closer to the central building. The whole complex was located on a large patch of private land on the coast of Wide Island east of the city. Even with the transportation Tinkerer had arranged for her, it had taken some time to get out here, and because Dess had needed to wait until her mother was asleep and Noelle had left the house again before sneaking out, she was anxious to get this job done as fast as possible. In and out and back home before anyone noticed she was missing.

Fortunately she encountered little resistance along the way. As she snuck closer to the research compound, she began to wonder at the lack of security. Shouldn’t a place like this have more guards? Nighttime sentries patrolling the perimeter?

“Something’s wrong,” she said under her breath. “Where are all the guards?”

“Heheh, don’t tell me I spent all that time upgrading your suit for nothing. You really haven’t encountered anyone?”

“No one yet,” Dess confirmed. She held up her arm, looking at the non-lethal electric stun bracelets that Seam had built into her costume. “And I was so looking forward to zapping someone with these things.”

“Perhaps you’ll still get your chance,” Seam said, “once you’re inside.”

Dess grunted, sneaking her way towards the edge of the main building. She had a bad feeling in her gut, like there was something she was missing.

And then she saw the body.

One of the guards she had been on alert for was sprawled face-down across the ground just outside the doors into the building. Human, from the shape of him and the blood pooling underneath his body.

Dess turned to look behind her, out across the yard, and felt a shiver run down her spine like a bucket of ice water as she noticed something that had escaped her gaze before. A couple trails of dark blood stained the concrete, leading away into shadowy corners.

Someone had gotten here first. Someone with a much more violent approach to corporate espionage.

“Seam!” Dess hissed, retreating into the nearest patch of shadows. “I found the guards - they’re all dead! Something seriously #$*#ed-up happened here.” Her eyes swept her surroundings, her ears alert for any sound. “If you’ve led me into a trap, I swear by the Angel, I’ll -”

“December, listen to me,” Seam interrupted. “Whatever’s going on over there, I swear, I had nothing to do with it. It’s possible…we may not be the only ones chasing this particular prize.”

Dess took a deep breath and clenched her fists, forcing herself to stay calm. “Tell me again how you knew this thing you’re after was here.”

“Leaked internal SI communications,” Seam said. “I’m clearly not the only one who intercepted this information.”

“Son of a -” Dess nearly swore. “You’re saying someone else planned a robbery for the same night as we did?”

“I had hoped, if I could put together a plan quickly enough…”

“So that’s why you chose me, is it?” She should have known their plan smacked of desperation. “I was the best you could do on short notice.”

A hesitant pause. “I’ve little doubt you’re the best I could have done in any event,” Seam finally said. “But you’ve yet to prove that. Listen to me, December. It is of vital importance that you retrieve the artifact inside that vault, before someone else gets to it first.”

But Dess was already turning away, shaking her head. “No. No, I’m pulling out. Mission Abort. Risking arrest is one thing, but I’m not following a trail of corpses into a deathtrap for you.”

Seam’s voice, muffled as it was through the crystal, sounded furious. “December, if you renege on our deal now, you’ll spend the rest of your life behind bars. I’m

not going to let myself be trapped here on account of you!"

"Trapped? What are you talking about, Tinkerer? You still haven't even told me what it is that I'm retrieving here. Why is this job so important to you?"

"That won't *matter* if the job is not *completed,"* Seam hissed. "December, if you won't do it to honor our deal, do it for your sister's sake. The item we're here for is incredibly dangerous in the wrong hands. I have my own use for it, but I don't intend to cause anyone any harm. I can't say the same for anyone else who might be after it. And if the criminal element in this city gets their hands on such a weapon, the chaos they could unleash will put all of us in danger. First and foremost the superheroes like Spider-Doe who would have to fight back against that power."

"Damn it," Dess growled. She looked back at the dead body. As much as she didn't trust Seam, what they said made sense. Even if she was too late to stop a robbery, she should at least see if she could find out who was responsible for it. Get *some* kind of intel to pass on to Noelle, so she could be prepared for whatever came of this.

"Fine, you win. I'm going inside."

She hurried across the pavement to the corpse, giving it a cursory check for a pulse just in case - she'd learned from babysitting Kris back in the day that in case of medical emergency, you could check for a human's heartbeat by feeling their neck. It could be hard to tell sometimes if a human was dead or merely injured, what with how their bodies just…stuck around. This one was unfortunately very dead, though. Dess shivered and said a brief prayer to the Angel under her breath for the poor SOUL.

Then she turned her attention to the entrance. The doors had been left open, and while that should have triggered some kind of after hours alarm, there was only silence from inside. The intruders must have disabled the security system somehow.

She crept inside and down a darkened hallway. It was difficult to see without the facility's lights on, so she almost tripped over a couple more bodies as she rounded a corner. She didn't stop to check their vitals as well, though. Now that she was inside, she didn't want to waste any time hanging around at a crime scene.

"Seam!" she whispered. "I'm inside. Which way is the vault?"

"Downstairs," their voice echoed back at her. "I have the blueprints in front of me. Take this hallway about another 100 feet, then turn left, then the stairs will be on your right."

Dess followed their directions, tense and ready for anything. But all was silent and still as the grave. At least until she reached the stairs.

She almost walked right into the man, her eyes still adjusting to the dark. She couldn't quite tell who the shape looming up out of the darkness was, but she

saw him raise a gun, heard the tell-tale click of the safety and heard a rough, deep voice shout, “Who’s there?! Don’t move!”

Dess reacted without thinking. Before the man could get over his surprise, she activated the taser bracelets on her wrists and sent twin blasts of electric energy arcing through the air like an electrified version of her sister’s webbing. The lightning hit the figure in the chest and spread across his body, blue crackling streaks lighting up his features. Dess got a glimpse of a bulky shark monster twitching and spasming before the sparks faded and he dropped his gun to the floor with a clatter and began to topple forwards.

She rushed in to catch the guy and ease him to the ground softly, before he made any more noise. Easier said than done, too - shark monsters were *heavy.*

“December!” Seam’s voice echoed up from her pocket. “Come in! Tell me what’s happening.”

“Found a shark guy guarding the stairs,” she grunted. “Took him out. Your zappy gadgets worked like a charm.”

“A shark, you say?” Seam mused. “That is odd. Most of the criminal shark monsters work for Hammerhead’s gang, but he’s just another would-be Kingpin. Purely street level crime. This kind of heist would be unusually ambitious for his crew.”

“Maybe they’re trying to move up in the world,” Dess said. When no one immediately came running to see what the disturbance had been, she decided she was in the clear and proceeded on through the door to the stairwell. “What I want to know is, how long do you figure we have until Mr. Stark gets wind of what’s happening at his plant?”

“Probably not long. There isn’t much that escapes that man’s notice. You’ll have to move fast.”

“I’m getting the feeling,” Dess griped, taking the stairs as quickly as she could in the dark, “that you didn’t really expect me to pull this job off.”

“Without the complication of another simultaneous robbery, I had calculated your odds of success as being sufficiently worth the risk.”

Easy for them to say when they weren’t the one risking anything. “And with this little ‘complication’ factored in?”

Seam had the gall to chuckle. “Perhaps it would be best if I didn’t tell you your revised odds.”

Dess bit back a retort at the faint sound of voices coming from somewhere below her. “Someone’s up ahead. Going radio silent. Crystal silent. Whatever.”

She crept down the last few steps, listening in. She could just barely hear the words echoing up from the distance.

“The vault’s right there,” a gravelly male voice was saying. “What are you waiting for?”

“Patience, Hammerhead,” another voice replied; this one had an odd echo to it. “The layers of high-tech security on this door are intricate and complex. It’s not so simple a matter as walking right through. I’ve been attempting to attune my body to a level of intangibility so complete as to be utterly undetectable - and your complaining is not making it any easier.”

There was light ahead, as well as the voices. They were coming from behind a pair of doors. Dess tiptoed forward to see what was going on. She poked her head up to look through the window in the door, staying mostly out of sight, and saw a high-ceilinged chamber with a massive round door at the far end, bigger than any bank vault. Sleeker and more futuristic, too, a complex mechanism of smooth boltless metal plating. A faint glow from LED panels along the walls cast the room in a bluish hue, and a steady hum emanated from somewhere, like a computer left overnight in sleep mode, waiting to come back to active life. Vast machines and bulky inventions crowded the sides of the space, leaving an unobstructed walkway through the center. Some of those objects were hidden under tarps, and it was impossible for Dess’s untrained eyes to tell what they even were, if they were dangerous weapons or merely failed prototypes put into storage down here. It didn’t matter. The only thing that mattered was the vault.

A group of at least a dozen shark monsters in suits holding machine guns were standing in front of it, led by a shark with a long, flat T-shaped head. Beyond all the mobsters, standing in front of the door, was a monster dressed in a white cloak. He had an amorphous body shape, and looked almost transparent, his skin glowing a pale blue. A ghost monster.

They were a rare monster type, and Dess knew they got a bit of a bad rap, mostly thanks to guys like this. She didn’t believe that some types of monsters were more naturally predisposed towards criminality than others - that was all a bunch of racist BS. But she couldn’t help but admit that her own criminal activities would have been a lot easier with the added advantage of being able to walk through walls.

She ducked back down and quietly relayed the situation to Seam. “What should I do here? These guys are armed and I’m way outnumbered. And I don’t even know *how* to fight a ghost monster.”

“Perhaps this will work to our advantage. I had my own ideas for how to get past that vault, but why do the work yourself when you could get someone else to do the hard part for you?”

“That does seem to be your style,” Dess said pointedly. “So, what, you’re saying I should let this ghost guy take our loot?”

“Or at least get it out of the vault for us. It will be much easier to steal once it’s out in the open.”

“Easy for you to say! That doesn’t solve the problem of the dozen men with guns. I can hold my own hand-to-hand, but even with your gizmos, I can’t take

that many on by myself. I'm no superhero."

"Then maybe it's time to call in somebody who is," Seam's voice purred. "I believe you might know someone?"

"Huh?" Dess questioned. "What do you -" And then it clicked. "Oh, #*$@ no," she hissed. "I'm not getting Noelle involved in this mess."

"It's either that or let these criminals escape with a powerful weapon," Seam reminded her. "Either way, someone will have to deal with them eventually. Why not give your sister the chance to stop them now, before they become any more dangerous? Then once the threat is neutralized, we can retrieve what we came here for and get out."

"Why can't we just leave it to Stark?" Dess said. "His house, his mess."

"We can't assume he will intervene, and have no way of contacting him. Besides, Chujin Stark would likely treat you as just another intruder. He would never allow you to take the item you seek. But your sister may be more amenable."

"But what if -"

"December," Seam said firmly. "There is little time. You must make a choice, and do so now."

Dess swore under her breath, and peeked through the door again. The ghost had vanished, leaving the others standing warily around the vault door as if waiting for something to happen. He must have figured out how to get inside.

"Damn it," Dess muttered. Noelle had slept for most of the day back at the house, but by this time of night she would probably be back out patrolling the city as Spider-Doe. Hopefully she was nearby.

Dess fished out her copy of the earpiece communicators Berdly had made for Spider-Doe's closest allies and put it in her ear. It would give her a direct line to the counterpart inside Noelle's mask. Noelle had insisted she keep it on her at all times in case of emergencies, because it was the most reliable way to get in contact with her when she was swinging through the city.

Dess wasn't sure how the signal would hold up down here in the basement level of a secure facility, though. When she tried calling Noelle, all she got was static on the other end. "Noelle!" she whispered, raising her voice as much as she dared. "Hey, Noelle, are you there?"

A voice came through, familiar but broken up by choppy static. "Dess? Why are you on the emergency frequency? Is something wrong at the house?"

"No! Uh, everything's fine. I was just, um…I was listening to that police scanner radio app I have, and I heard a report of a break-in in progress at the Stark Industries plant on Wide Island. Apparently, uh, a witness saw a group of armed men kill a guard and force their way in. Said they had a ghost monster with them. Do you know the place?"

“Yeah, I know where it is! I’m in Brooklyn right now, I bet I can beat the police there!”

“I’ve heard rumors about that place. They say they keep a lot of high-tech weaponry in a vault in the basement there. Wouldn’t want any bad guys getting their hands on it, right?”

“Definitely not! Thanks for the tip, Dess. I’ll let you know how it turns out!”

Dess bit her lip, praying to the Angel she wouldn’t regret this. “Hey, Noelle?”

“Yeah?”

“Be careful.”

She cut the comms, then checked on the mobsters again. They were still waiting, looking more impatient by the minute. Thankfully, they weren’t doing a terribly good job of keeping watch. Like the job was going smoothly enough for them that they were already letting their guard down.

Dess waited for an opening when she was sure no one was looking her way, then darted inside the vault chamber and hid behind the nearest piece of machinery in the corner of the room.

“What are you doing?” Seam’s voice said, barely audible.

“Hiding,” Dess whispered, “until Noelle gets here. I’m not just going to leave her to fend for herself against these guys. I need to be ready in case she needs back-up.”

She checked the charges on her wrist tasers. Maybe she could take a couple more of those goons down if she had to. Even the odds slightly for Noelle.

But she had only been crouched in the corner for a minute or two before the vault’s locks began to loudly disengage and the round door swung open. The ghost monster stepped out of the shadows inside, carrying…a large metal briefcase?

“That it?” Hammerhead grunted. “Thought it’d be bigger.”

“We’ve secured our prize,” the ghost confirmed. “Time to make our egress.”

“What about the rest of the vault?”

“Nothing in there is as valuable as what’s in this case,” the ghost said firmly. “We shouldn’t linger any longer. We have what we came for, so it’s time to go. *Now.”*

“Do they have the artifact?” Seam’s voice said faintly.

“They’ve got something,” Dess whispered. “I’m not sure what it is.”

She watched from her hiding spot as Hammerhead held up a fin in front of the ghost. “Hold it. Want to see it for myself. Ain’t just gonna take your word for it.”

“Paranoid fool,” the ghost said angrily. “You imagine that I wouldn’t honor our deal? That I’m planning some kind of trick?”

“I don’t ‘imagine’ nothin’. Just wanna see.”

“Fine,” the ghost said, and unlatched the briefcase. As they opened it, the dim room was filled with a brilliant blue light.

Dess squinted to see past the glow. There was something inside the case, slotted into a square indentation in the base, surrounded by what looked like electronic circuitry. It was some kind of cube, though what it was made of, she couldn’t tell. Only that it was glowing, crackling with light blue energy.

“It’s some kind of glowing blue cube thing,” she reported to Seam.

Their voice came through in a low but excited hiss. “That’s our target! December, you must do whatever it takes to secure it, understand?”

“There, you see?” the ghost said, slamming the case shut. “Fits the description, doesn’t it?”

“That it does,” Hammerhead admitted. “I’m guessing whatever this thing is, it’s worth a lot of money, huh?”

“It is worth far more than that, you fool,” the ghost snapped. “But you’ll get your cut, don’t worry. Assuming you can finish the job and get us safely out of here.”

“Awright, you heard him, boys!” Hammerhead roared, waving his hand for his goons to follow him. “Let’s get outta here before Iron Monster crashes the party.”

“Damn it, they’re leaving!” Dess hissed. “And Noelle isn’t here yet!”

“You have to delay them,” Seam whispered. “They must not be allowed to leave with that cube!”

They were walking quickly across the room towards her; in a moment they were going to pass right by Dess’s hiding spot. Shit, shit, shit! The only ideas she had right now were bad ones, but if she didn’t do something, they were going to get away.

Well, what was one more bad idea to add to the pile?

Dess waited until they drew a little nearer, and then jumped out from behind cover and fired off twin blasts of electricity from her shock bracelets at the ghost with the briefcase.

The energy blasts passed right through his spectral body and hit a shark mobster behind him, who collapsed to the floor sparking and twitching. All the other sharks, Hammerhead included, froze and pointed their guns at her. Dess pointed her arms at them in turn, hoping they wouldn’t realize that her bracelets took a few seconds to recharge between blasts. “Hold it right there!” she shouted, trying to make her voice sound intimidating.

The ghost monster stared at her impassively. “Who the hell are you supposed to be? One of Stark’s bodyguards?”

“I’m, um, the Dark Deer?” Her voice cracked on the last word. Damn it, that sounded way less cool out loud than it had in her head. She should have listened to Azzy and chosen a better codename.

“I’ve just remembered I don’t actually care,” the ghost said. He turned to Hammerhead. “Time to earn your keep again. Kill this idiot before she can call for reinforcements.”

“Ha! I’ve *already* called - yikes!” Dess darted back behind cover as the sharks opened fire, bullets pinging off the bank of dead machinery. “@*#&!”

“December!” Seam’s voice shouted. “What’s going on?”

“I’m pinned down! Can’t get the case with them shooting at me!” She poked her head up to fire off a couple hasty electric blasts, but they missed. A bullet whizzed right between her antlers and she ducked her head down again, the sound of gunfire ringing in her ears.

This was bad. This was really bad. They were going to get away, and she was probably going to get shot. “Tinkerer, you stitched-up old bastard!” she shouted over the gunfire. “I didn’t sign up to be used for target practice! I need an exit plan!”

“You’ll leave with the cube or you won’t leave at all!” Seam said. “You still have a job to do, December. Get it done!”

“$*@% your cube!” she shouted back. Screw this. Tinkerer and their stupid trinkets weren’t worth dying for.

She risked another quick peek out of cover. Most of the goons were still pinning her down with gunfire, but they were advancing on her position, and one of them was sneaking around to the side, trying to flank her. Shit! She couldn’t stay put, but there was nowhere else to go.

She put her back to the wall as bullets ricocheted over her head, and adjusted her stun bracelets. A few charges left before they ran out of juice. Not enough for all those sharks, but maybe, if she could hold out a little longer…

Dess braced herself, prepared to fight for her life.

Just then, she heard a familiar *thwip thwip* noise, and one of the goon’s guns was yanked from his hands and went flying, crashing against the wall opposite her. The gunfire stopped, and she poked her head out of hiding just in time to see a dark figure flip through the air and land on top of one of the tall covered machines in a crouch. The figure almost entirely blended into the shadows - except for their eyes.

“Noelle?” Dess gasped under her breath. Why did she look like that? Had she changed her costume?

“What gives, you guys?” Noelle’s voice called out - muffled and echoey, but recognizably her. She sounded different somehow, though. There was a weird layered echo that made her voice sound deeper. “Decided to start the party without me? Usually people wait to start shooting until they see the whites of my eyes.”

“It’s Spider-Doe!” Hammerhead shouted. “Light ‘er up!”

The henchmen all raised their guns, and it took everything Dess had in her to avoid shouting out Noelle’s name in warning. It would be best if her sister never knew she was here.

Noelle’s spider-sense was all the warning she needed anyways. Even as the bad guys opened fire, Spider-Doe was already leaping away, swinging across the room, using all the machinery for cover.

“Now there’s the greeting I’m accustomed to!” Noelle said as she dove out of a swing feet-first and kicked two goons away. She landed right in the midst of the rest, jumping around, bouncing off of them, scattering them like bowling pins. She was vastly outnumbered, but they couldn’t shoot her for fear of hitting each other, and she moved so fast, never staying in one place long, switching up her targets as she let out a flurry of kicks, uppercuts and web blasts. She fought like a monster possessed.

Dess hadn’t seen Noelle in a fight since they tackled Kingpin together, and it was clear that Spider-Doe’s skills had improved since then. For a moment, despite the bullets and bodies flying around, all Dess could do was stop and stare as her sister plowed through the burly shark monsters like they were made out of paper.

*Damn…when did Noelle get so badass?*

She shouldn’t have let herself stand there in full view, watching the fight. Because as she watched, Noelle landed on the ground not far from her, straightened up, looked right at Dess, and froze in shock. *“Dess?!”*

“Noelle, look out!” Dess called, because while Noelle was staring at her in stupefied disbelief, one of the mobsters was sneaking up behind her, raising a gun.

Noelle didn’t even turn to look at the goon. Instead, some kind of webbing-like tendril shot out of her back, wrapped around the shark, and slammed him into the ground before retracting back into Noelle’s costume.

“Woah!” Dess jumped, startled. “How did you do that? Did you grow some new spider-powers you haven’t told me about?” That would explain the cool new costume, too; her lil sis had gotten a power-up.

“Nevermind that!” Noelle said, walking over to her. “Dess, what the hell are you doing here?” She pointed at Dess’s ankle monitor as though she thought Dess had somehow forgotten it was there. “You’re not supposed to leave the house!”

“I found a way around it,” Dess said. “It’s a long story, Elly.”

“That tip I got from you… you were already here? Why?”

“I needed your help. I was trying to -”

Before she knew anything was wrong, Noelle was pulling her to the ground. “Get down!”

Bullets whizzed overhead, pinging off the machinery. Dess looked over her shoulder, past her sister, and saw Hammerhead standing by the vault door, spraying a machine gun wildly. “I ain’t going back to prison, Spider-Doe!” he yelled over the sound of gunfire. “You’re not taking me alive!”

Dess caught a silvery flash of movement out of the corner of her eye and saw the ghost monster floating away towards the exit, carrying the briefcase.

She didn’t hesitate; she scrambled out from under Noelle and took off after the ghost, even with bullets flying everywhere. Noelle shouted her name but she kept running. “I need that case!” she called back to Noelle. “Cover me!”

After what she’d seen, Dess had no doubt Spider-Doe could take care of Hammerhead, but she couldn’t do everything at once - which meant it was up to Dess to recover the stolen weapon. And maybe steal it herself. Not for Tinkerer - screw them - but so that Noelle wouldn’t have to worry about it. If that cube thing was as dangerous as Tinkerer implied, then no way could she let the ghost escape with it. This was her chance to finally help!

“Stop running! I mean, floating! Whatever!” she called, forcing herself to speed up. Angel, she was out of shape from all those months cooped up inside. Did floating that fast make ghost monsters get tired? Sure didn’t seem like it.

The ghost slowed just before he reached the doors, unable to phase through them while holding the case. But just as Dess caught up with him, he whirled around and swung the briefcase at her like a bludgeon. “Get away from me, fool!”

Her fistfighting reflexes kicked in and she ducked under the swing just in time. “I’m not letting you get away! Give me that!”

She threw herself on top of the ghost monster before he could resume fleeing. She passed right through him, but it was the case she was aiming for, and she seized it and tried to rip it from his hand. He held on fast. For an incorporeal monster, he had a tighter grip than she expected.

“Hah, might as well let me have it, dude, because you can’t make me let go!” Dess taunted. “You’re all insubstantial and stuff, what are you gonna do, hit m-”

She cut off as a ghostly arm passed directly through her chest. It tingled, an incredibly uncomfortable sensation, like ice water splashed on her insides.

“I can make my body corporeal at will,” the ghost monster said. “So unless you want to see what happens when I solidify inside your chest, let go of the case.”

Dess stole a quick glance over her shoulder, looking for backup. But Noelle was still fighting Hammerhead. She’d disarmed him, but as Dess watched, the shark

bull-rushed Noelle, using his T-shaped head to slam her against the wall like a battering ram.

“Let go of the case *now,”* the ghost repeated. “Or I *will* kill you!”

Dess hesitated. Not because she was reluctant to give up her prize, but because she’d just heard something. A heavy thudding sound from just outside the room, getting louder by the second. Like footsteps.

The doors to the vault chamber burst open, practically wrenched from their hinges. The ghost spun around in surprise, and while he was caught off-guard, Dess yanked the briefcase from his spectral fingers.

A dramatic figure stood in the doorway: a sleek, tall suit of humanoid combat armor made from red and gold metal, a shell-like helmet covering his head. There was a round white light in the center of his chest, and the helmet’s eyes glowed blue.

“You know, when my silent alarms were tripped on the vault, I thought I was going to have a serious fight on my hands,” the mechanical monster said in a filtered, electronic-sounding voice. “Like maybe the Melter, or the Living Laser, or hell, I don’t know, even the Unicorn. But it turns out it’s just you, Ghost, so this is going to be easy. I’m honestly kind of embarrassed that you made it this far.”

A panel of armor on his bulky arm slid open, something that looked like a high-tech grenade launcher extruding from it. With a *thwunk* noise it shot a circular capsule that landed at Ghost’s feet and unfurled like a flower, clamping magnetically onto the floor and releasing some kind of electric force field that enveloped the thief in a cage of lightning. Ghost tried to go incorporeal and escape through the bars, only to scream and retreat back into the center of the cage as the energy shocked him.

“Yeah, I wouldn’t do that if I were you.” He raised his hands, the palms glowing and making a menacing humming noise, and pointed them at Dess. “Drop the case.”

“Mr. Stark! Iron Monster, hi! Big fan,” Dess lied. Rich corporate #@*$er with his flashy mech suit and his infinite money hacks, he was the worst superhero ever and oh my god why did she think she could steal from him, she was so goddamn screwed. “I was just, um, apprehending this thief for you. We haven’t met before but I’m a, uh, a new superhero! Codename is Dar- um, I mean…” *Shit, think of a name that doesn’t sound stupid!* “Um… Vixen?”

“Uh-huh, sure kid. Is that ankle monitor part of your costume?”

Dess looked down at the bracelet on her leg and laughed nervously. “It’s, uh, my cool high-tech gadget accessory? You know how it is, man. Never leave the house without one, right?”

“Okayyy, well, this is private property and you’re trespassing.” The humming noise from his hands intensified, clearly building up a charge. “We can sort it out

with the police when you wake up."

"Wait, no!" Dess yelled. She raised the briefcase like a shield just as Iron Monster fired an energy blast from his hands at her. The pulse hit the case instead of her chest, but it still knocked her off her hooves. She went flying backwards, barely managing to keep her grip on the case as she fell, and cracked her head against the floor.

For a split-second she must have blacked out, because the next thing she knew, Iron Monster was standing over her, reaching for the briefcase.

"Dess! What did you do? Get away from her!" Noelle came swinging in hot, slamming her feet directly into Iron Monster's chest and, amazingly, managing to knock him off his feet. But before he could fall, his back thrusters kicked in and steadied his balance.

"Spider-Doe, isn't it?" He hovered a few feet in the air, thrusters on his feet and back keeping him aloft, while Noelle landed in a protective crouch in front of Dess. "Didn't think you were the type to turn to crime. Why are you protecting this thief?"

"She's my sister," Noelle said, "and she's not a thief! I stopped the real thieves for you." She gestured at Hammerhead, who had joined the other thugs sprawled unconscious around the room.

"You think I need help stopping Ghost and his hired goons?" Iron Monster said. "You're both trespassing. And I read about your sister in the news - used to work for the Kingpin, didn't she? Sorry to break it to you, Spider-Kid, but it looks like big sis is working with the bad guys again."

"I wasn't…" Dess groaned, trying to sit up, but she was groggy and could hardly talk. She felt at the back of her head weakly, clutching the briefcase to her chest: no blood, but god was she dizzy. Concussion, maybe? It was hard to think clearly.

"That's some extremely dangerous Stark Industries property you've got your arms wrapped around," Iron Monster said. He pointed his hand at Dess, that electric hum emanating from his palm again. "Give me the case. Don't make me say it again."

"And I said," Noelle snarled, "STAY AWAY FROM HER!"

She threw herself at Iron Monster, even though he was twice her size. Her fist slammed against the "jaw" of his helmet and his armored head snapped to the side, but he didn't stumble this time. Noelle pulled her hand back, shaking it and wincing like she'd just tried to punch a concrete wall.

"Kid, you're really starting to piss me off," Iron Monster said. "I don't want to have to hurt you."

"We'd like to see you try!" Noelle challenged. She sounded angry, a deep growl to her voice that Dess had rarely ever heard before.

“Wait, ‘elle…” Dess said, struggling to stand, but Noelle wasn’t even listening. She jumped off the ground and flipped right over Iron Monster’s head, spraying webbing over the eyes of his helmet as she went.

Iron Monster activated his thrusters and flew into the air, trying to rip the webbing off his helmet with one hand while the other used some sort of auto-targeting system to shoot lasers at Noelle. She swung around the room like a black-and-white blur, dodging each blast, then shot two weblines at the towering machines on either side of Iron Monster and slingshotted herself directly at him.

They collided, Noelle punching him repeatedly in the face, screaming incoherent rage as he flew blindly through the air. She managed to steer him straight into the open vault door, jumping off just before he crashed into it.

Iron Monster picked himself off the ground, finally ripping the webbing free, and extended his right arm at Noelle, fist clenched. He fired a missile at her, streaking through the air leaving a trail of smoke behind it. Dess tried to shout a warning, but another weird tendril whipped out of Noelle’s costume at the last second, plucked the missile out of the air, and threw it right back at Iron Monster. It caught him in the chest and exploded, slamming him back against the vault door.

More tentacles sprouted from Noelle’s back, wrapping themselves around Iron Monster’s arms and legs, pinning him spread-eagle against the dented metal surface. And she was *pulling* - his armor started to spark as Noelle tried to rip the suit to pieces.

Dess pulled herself to her hooves despite her swimming head and began to stagger over in their direction, carrying the briefcase with her. She didn’t care what happened to her anymore, she just knew she had to stop this fight before Noelle got hurt.

The circle on Iron Monster’s chest began glowing, a bright yellow-white light. “Noelle, look out!” Dess shouted.

And then an enormous laser blast erupted from Iron Monster’s chest, slamming directly into Noelle. Her costume’s tendrils released Iron Monster as Noelle flew backwards, the concussive force of the blast sending her flying backwards into the wall.

*No!* Dess bit back a scream. If that $*#&er had hurt Noelle…

She couldn’t stop him on her own. She needed a weapon. She needed something that would make him back off.

The briefcase’s handle was still clenched in her trembling hand. What’s more, as she looked down at it, she saw that the blast it had taken had knocked the locking mechanism loose. She stumbled to her knees, keeping one eye on the others as she tried to get the case open.

Fortunately, Iron Monster hadn’t noticed her. He was focused on Noelle, who was trying to stand - it was hard to tell if she was badly injured.

“You’ve got some fight in you, kid, but I’m not in the mood to go another round,” Iron Monster said, another weapon popping out of his suit as he raised his arm. “Do us both a favor and stay down, will you?”

Some kind of sonic pulse began emitting from the weapon on his wrist. Dess could hear it from here, even though it wasn’t aimed at her: a shrill screech that hurt her ears. Up close it looked worse - she could see the sound waves creating a rippling effect in the air like a cone extending outwards, and Noelle, caught right in the middle of it, began to scream.

Something strange was happening to Noelle’s costume. It was like the sonic waves were peeling it off of her, but it didn’t move like fabric, didn’t split and tear. It moved like liquid, or some kind of glue, flailing in the air like a thing alive, a mass of writhing tendrils. It seemed to be melting off Noelle even as patches of it stuck to her fur, clinging to her body.

Over the whine of the sonic, Dess heard Noelle’s voice screaming, **“NO! YOU WON’T SEPARATE US! WE WON’T LET YOU! NOT EVER AGAIN!”**

Dess didn’t understand what was happening, but she had to make it stop. She had to protect her sister. She ripped open the briefcase and didn’t even pause to think before seizing the glowing blue cube in her hand and yanking it free.

The entire chamber lit up with brilliant blue light, and Dess’s body lit up with energy, clearing her head, electrifying her body, energizing and overwhelming her. It was an intense sensation, but it didn’t hurt. She felt *incredible. Powerful.* Like she could reach out and bend the world to her will.

*This* was what she was supposed to hand over to Tinkerer? No wonder they wanted it. Dess didn’t understand what it was or what it could do, but she could sense the raw potential in this object, the rush of infinite power.

She had Iron Monster’s attention now. She couldn’t read his expression through that stiff iron mask of his, but his body language was plain as he raised his hand, gesturing at her the way someone might gesture at a tiger crouched to pounce at them. “Put that down. You don’t want to be messing around with that.”

“Not until you stop hurting Noelle!” Dess demanded. “Turn that - that thing off!”

Iron Monster complied, shutting off the device and lowering his arm. Noelle was curled in a ball on the floor, and Dess watched as the inky black liquid that she’d mistaken for a costume began to flow back over her body, reassembling its shape around her, covering her golden hair as it flowed over her head again. It was still twitching though, tentacles still squirming up from its surface like a thing in pain. She couldn’t tell if it was hurting Noelle, too.

The way it moved made Dess’s skin crawl, but she could worry about whatever the hell that was all about once she’d gotten herself and Noelle out of there. If Noelle was too hurt to get them out, then Dess could take her to Tinkerer’s hideout. Maybe Seam would know what to do about that…whatever it was crawling all over her sister. They had all those weird magic gizmos and stuff, and

they would *have* to help Noelle after she delivered this energy cube thing to them.

Iron Monster took a step towards her. “I can’t let you leave with that. Do you have any idea what you’re holding? Listen - there’s a SOUL in that containment cube. A human SOUL, one of the most powerful I’ve ever seen. If an ordinary monster tries to handle that kind of power without any protection, it could destroy them.”

*A SOUL?* Dess frowned, feeling the power flooding her body, and yes, she could sense it now - something not *alive,* exactly, but a life force, persisting even without a body. A certain emotional wavelength, a feeling that enveloped her but was not her own. If she had to put a word to that feeling, it would have been Integrity - the feeling of being confident and secure in herself, of absolute certainty in what was right. She could tell that the feeling didn’t come from her because she’d never felt that way before, not like this. She’d always walked the line between right and wrong, struggling to tell the difference between good deeds and terrible mistakes.

But for once in her life, holding this SOUL’s power inside her, Dess knew exactly what to do.

Seam’s voice echoed up from the crystal again, faint and distorted. “December, do you read me? I’m getting some kind of magical interference, I can’t tell what’s happening! Did you secure the artifact?”

She pictured Tinkerer and Jevil in her mind, the strange old ragged cat and the balloon-like jester, lurking in their hideout full of trinkets and mystic junk and dangerous weaponry. Dess had wondered if she could trust them; Integrity knew instinctively.

Iron Monster suddenly flew at her, thrusters blazing, looking to catch her off-guard while she was distracted. Dess acted on some instinct she hadn’t known she had, holding up the cube.

A portal ripped open in front of her, a circle of wispy, swirling energy like smoke. Black in the center, blue and glowing around the edges, it loomed impossibly in the air like a tear in the very fabric of space itself.

If she looked closely, Dess could just make out Seam’s shocked face staring at her through the portal, like a reflection glimpsed through a smoky pane of glass. And then Iron Monster hurtled directly into the portal, but instead of bursting through the smoke and light and slamming into her on the other side, she saw him appear in the image of Seam’s hideout, the startled cat ducking aside as Iron Monster crashed into their workbench.

Dess lowered the cube and the portal closed just as quickly as it had opened. All was still. She was alone.

Alone save for Noelle, that is. Spider-Doe was still curled up on the floor, shaking. Dess hurried to her sister’s side, dropping the cube. “Noelle! Elly, are you okay?”

She reached out with tentative, trembling hands and touched Noelle's shoulder. The substance of that bizarre living costume *squirmed* under her fingers, and she yanked her hand away, revulsion lurching to life inside her stomach. "Noelle?" She turned to reach for where she'd let the cube fall to the floor. "Noelle, just hang on. Whatever that thing is, I'm going to get it off of you, okay?"

In a sudden flash of movement, impossibly quick, Noelle seized Dess by the throat and stood, lifting the older doe off her hooves. **"NO."**

"Hrrk!" Dess gasped, choking as her sister's powerful fingers squeezed her neck. She kicked her hooves and clawed at Noelle's wrist, but Noelle's arm felt slick and wet and cold, impossible to pull away. "Noelle…why…"

**"She won't separate us,"** Noelle said in a voice that didn't sound like her at all. She stared up at Dess from behind white, empty abstract eyes on the black surface of her mask - or was it a face? A face that had covered over her sister's like a fresh coat of paint over a wall. **"No one will separate us ever again."**

*I haven't felt like myself lately,* Noelle had said. *I think I'm becoming somebody else.*

Horror flooded Dess's SOUL, a feeling every bit as real and potent as the power she'd held moments ago. Though she'd dropped the cube, holding it had changed something in her perception. She thought she could see a light pulsing from Noelle's body, the energy of her sister's SOUL.

It was black. A terrible anti-light.

"Noelle, please -" Dess choked out, but Spider-Doe didn't release her. Instead, she slammed Dess against the floor. Dess felt her head crack against the hard surface and saw stars burst across her eyes.

**"You don't need her,"** Spider-Doe said. It didn't sound like she was talking to Dess - like she was talking to herself, or to - or to…

The pressure on her neck stopped and Dess let out a wheezing gasp, only to be cut short as a fist slammed into her jaw. Pain erupted across her face, white-hot. She gaped, stunned and only semi-conscious, darkness encroaching on her vision.

She tried to lift her arm, but her limbs felt numb and heavy. "Noelle…"

**"You don't need anyone else,"** Spider-Doe said, pulling her fist back behind her head again. **"They don't understand us. They just want to keep us apart."**

Dess coughed, her eyes rolling into the back of her skull. "I only wanted…to help…"

**"But we won't let them."**

Her little sister's fist slammed against her consciousness like a battering ram.

And then

she fell

# Chapter 20: Our Lady of the Angel

"What did you do? Oh god, WHAT DID I DO?"

Noelle's fist shook in the air above her sister's bruised and bloody face. It took immense effort just to lower her arm, slowly, her entire body trembling. She had managed to wrench back control, but not soon enough.

It was hard to shake the feeling of her body moving against her will, the sensation of her fist hitting Dess's face, even as inside she had been screaming in horror. It was like she'd been a puppet, dancing on black strings.

Now she knelt by Dess's side, afraid even to touch her. Dess had passed out, but she was still breathing - Noelle could see the skintight rubber suit over her chest rising and falling slightly. Angel, though, her face… It was difficult to tell just how badly injured she was, but it didn't look good.

**I am sorry, Noelle-Host,** the thing in her head told her. **I lost control.**

*"You* lost control?" Noelle said out loud, her voice high-pitched and frantic. "You TOOK control! I thought we agreed! I thought I told you never to do that!"

**I had to stop her. She was going to take me from you.**

"She was trying to help me!" Noelle screamed. "She's my *sister* and you *hurt her!"*

She dispelled her mask with a forceful mental command and buried her hands in her hair, clenching her fingers and tugging at the roots. Oh Angel, what had she done? She could feel the dark Other probing at her mind, trying to forcibly soothe her, polluting her thoughts like oil in water. It felt almost remorseful, but she didn't trust it anymore. She had sensed its emotions when it had attacked Dess as well, and she knew the anger and violence it was capable of.

Why had she ever let this thing inside her? She didn't know it would be like this. She hadn't wanted to hurt anyone. She had just been so lonely, so afraid of being on her own. She'd wanted someone, anyone, by her side helping her.

And she had wanted the power. Wanted to feel strong. She should have known better than anyone that such great power would come at a cost.

"Get AWAY from me!" Noelle began to beat her fists against her head. "I don't want you anymore! Get out! Get out get out get OUT!"

**You are upset. Please calm yourself.**

"NO!" Noelle screamed. "NOT UNTIL YOU LEAVE!"

**I will not leave you. I would not want a life without you, dear Noelle-Host. You are my tether to this world. We need each other. That is why we must**

**remain together forever.**

*Forever.* The word shot through Noelle's mind like a bullet. It really…oh god, it really wasn't going to respect her wishes, was it? She had let it in and now it wanted to stay.

Dess let out a low, wheezing breath, her eyes swollen shut. Her body twitched and she coughed and made a choked spluttering noise.

"Dess!" Noelle cried. Gently she tried to lift Dess up into a sitting position, supporting her with her arms wrapped around Dess's back. Touching her felt dangerous, but she couldn't just leave her there on the floor.

Dess's arms were limp, and as she coughed, blood spilled from her slack mouth. There was blood on the back of her head, too, matting her dark hair.

"Can you hear me?" Noelle pleaded. "Dess, talk to me, please, I'm so sorry!"

But Dess had only been semi-conscious at best, and had already passed out again in Noelle's arms, her head lolling back. *Oh god. I have to help her.*

How, though? Noelle couldn't just take her to the hospital. Dess was still wearing her ankle monitor, though the light on the side was red, indicating it was inactive. Noelle didn't know how she'd managed to turn it off, but Dess was still supposed to be on house arrest, and if she was caught breaking her parole, she'd go to jail for sure. Maybe Noelle could lie, tell the hospital staff Dess had been hurt during another break-in at their house? But then the police would end up involved anyway, and there was no way to maintain a lie like that for long without any evidence to support it.

Dess needed medical attention, though. She needed healing.

A thought flashed through Noelle's mind: Ceroba! The sorceress had saved Kris's life, saved Noelle from poison. Surely she could help with Dess's wounds, too.

But how to reach her? She didn't know if it was safe to move Dess, let alone swing her through the city draped over Noelle's shoulder. Last time, though, that door had appeared when Noelle needed help. So where was it now? Why wouldn't it appear?

"Ceroba!" Noelle called, hoping she would somehow magically be heard. "I need your help! Please, I'm desperate! Please, send me the Door!"

But nobody came. Ceroba had warned her, hadn't she? Noelle couldn't rely on her intervention every time there was trouble. The door would only appear in moments of true desperation, and Ceroba didn't control when and to whom it manifested.

As she looked around, seeking other options, Noelle's gaze fell on the glowing blue cube on the floor. Dess had been holding that, right? Noelle hadn't really been in a state to pay attention, but she remembered seeing Dess send Iron Monster away somewhere. There was something about the cube that drew her, something powerful. Maybe *it* could help Dess somehow.

She snagged it with a webline and pulled it towards her. As soon as she caught it in her hand, she felt something flowing through her - an energy, but totally unlike what she felt from her parasitic Other. Whereas that power felt cold and invasive, this was like stepping into a lake in summertime: calm and refreshing, making her feel light and floaty. Like anything was possible, like it was all going to be okay.

She had a sudden image of herself floating on her back on the surface of a vast, deep blue expanse of water, underneath an equally blue sky. Nothing around her but blue, and yet she had the feeling that she could go anywhere. Like the entire world was just under the surface of the water.

**What is this? It feels strange. I don't like it.**

That was good enough for her. Noelle knew what she had to do. She knew it instinctively, from somewhere deep inside her SOUL.

She held Dess against her body and squeezed the cube tight in her hand. *Take us to Ceroba.*

A whirlpool opened in the lake beneath her, and she closed her eyes and let herself sink.

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Noelle landed on her back with a thud, still holding Dess close. She opened her eyes to see a circle of whirling blue smoke and glowing light, just as it began to quickly shrink down to a pinhole and disappear.

"Noelle??" a voice said. She sat up to find herself in the back room of Ceroba's shop, the same room where she had woken up after being poisoned; she recognized the soft orange light and the smell of tea and herbs. Ceroba was standing in the doorway, staring at her with a look of stunned surprise. She was dressed more casually than the last time Noelle had seen her, in a scarlet sweater and long black skirt. "You didn't come in through the Door. How did you get here? And who is that?"

There was no time to explain. Noelle set the cube down on the floor and put Dess down on the couch as gently as she could. Dess's arm hung limply off the side. "It's my sister! You have to help her. I tried calling for - for the Door, but it wouldn't come."

"Apparently you didn't need it to find your way here." Ceroba approached her, and Noelle felt a sudden twisting of her insides from the symbiote - it didn't trust the kitsune. Noelle had almost gotten used to the feeling of it moving through her skin, but now it made her feel sick. With effort, she held back both the symbiote and her nausea.

“It shouldn’t have been possible for you to get in here undetected,” Ceroba said, frowning. “I have wards against intruders.” She knelt to pick up the cube and examined it, her eyes going wide with shock. “Noelle, where did you get *this?”*

“It doesn’t matter,” Noelle said, checking Dess’s breathing. “I was trying to stop a robbery at Stark Industries and Dess… she got hurt.”

Ceroba inhaled sharply. “Chujin Stark had this? And he didn’t tell me?”

“Huh? Do you know him?”

“We have…history,” Ceroba said. Her tone sounded bitter though, and she didn’t elaborate. “Were you intending to return this to him?”

“It’s not important,” Noelle said, more insistently. “I don’t care what you do with it. Please, my sister - can you help her?”

Ceroba tore her eyes from the cube and looked at Dess as though she’d almost forgotten about the girl bleeding on her couch. She knelt down and Noelle moved aside to let her look at Dess. “Let’s see…”

She moved her hand over Dess’s body, from the head down, and some kind of glowing red circle appeared in the air just in front of her palm. The circle was made of rings of light, moving in opposite directions from each other, each ring filled with symbols Noelle didn’t recognize. Ceroba hesitated when she noticed the ankle monitor, but didn’t comment on it.

“What are you doing?” Noelle asked.

“It’s like an x-ray,” Ceroba said. “Hush now, let me concentrate.”

She continued her examination for a moment while Noelle waited in tense silence, then closed her hand and dispelled the magic circle. “I can heal her, but it will be delicate and take some time. She’s suffered severe contusions to her face and neck, and a nasty skull fracture.” Her expression darkened. “Who did this to her?”

Noelle felt dizzy, like she couldn’t breathe, like her throat was blocked, full of black bile. She sank to the floor, her back against the couch, and managed to get out, in a small, tear-choked voice, “I…I did.”

Ceroba looked at her sharply. “What?”

“That thing,” Noelle said, her voice a low wail. “The thing you warned me about, that you said infected me…it took over. It made me hurt people.”

**Not Raven,** the voice in her mind said. **Not Gaster. Hurting them was your choice.**

“Shut up!” Noelle shouted. Ceroba blinked, startled, and Noelle added quickly, “Not you. I can hear it. It…talks to me, in my head.”

“That entity is sharing your mind?” Ceroba said, the concern in her voice obvious.

“It’s right here,” Noelle said, gesturing at her black costume. “I’m wearing it. And it’s… Angel, it’s wearing *me.* It’s inside my body.” She looked up at Ceroba’s amber eyes. “I want it out. I need it *gone.”*

**No! You don’t know what you’re saying, Noelle-Host. You don’t want to leave us, right? You wouldn’t abandon us? We are one! We must remain one!**

“I don’t want you anymore!” Noelle screamed. She felt panicked, unhinged. “Why won’t you just leave me alone!”

**Because we love you,** the voice said. **We will prove it.**

Noelle felt a sudden sensation like a rope being cinched tight around her SOUL - not a pain, exactly, but a pressure, the feeling of a trap snapping shut. “AAAAH!” She sat up straight like she’d just been kicked in the spine, back arched, head thrown back and mouth gaping open. “WHAT ARE YOU DOING TO ME?”

**Completing our bond. The process should not normally be rushed, but you leave me no choice. I must make sure you do not do anything you will regret.**

“Ceroba!” Noelle gasped. She was paralyzed and contorted, unable to move, her body under attack from the inside. “Help me!”

A red light like a flame enveloped Ceroba, and her clothing shifted and transformed into her kimono wrap. She manifested that glowing third eye on her forehead again and turned its gaze on Noelle, enveloping her in a golden spotlight. Noelle felt her taut muscles relax and she crumpled to the floor, still feeling that tightness inside her but at least able to move of her own volition again.

Ceroba’s voice was grim. “This is bad. It’s trying to bond with you on a cellular level. If something isn’t done soon, it will have full control over your body, and it will become impossible to remove it.”

A stab of panic pierced Noelle’s heart like a knife. “Can you save me?”

“If you had asked me when we first met, it would have been easier,” Ceroba told her, “but the symbiosis has advanced since then. I can try, but Noelle…I could just as easily end up killing you.”

“Hnng…” Noelle gritted her teeth, feeling the costume pressing tight against her skin, constricting her as it wrestled for control. “I can’t live like this, Ceroba. I don’t want to…to lose myself.”

**I don’t want to lose you either, Noelle-Host. Please don’t give up on us!**

“Very well,” Ceroba said. “Your fate may be in the Angel Above All’s hands now, Noelle Holiday, but I will try to be those hands, as best I can, and exorcise this

demon from your SOUL."

She stepped forwards, hands glowing scarlet with magic. "By the light of the Vishanti, let the darkness within this child be dispelled. I call upon the Crimson Bands of -"

Noelle's arm suddenly shot out unbidden and erupted into a mass of tentacles. The tendrils caught Ceroba in the chest, slamming her into a case of shelving on the wall, shattering the glass doors and sending the jars of medicines and herbs toppling off the shelves. Ceroba grunted in surprise at the impact, the wind knocked out of her.

*Oh no, no no no no no.* Noelle tried to order the symbiote to stop, but it wouldn't listen. Ceroba was being crushed by Noelle's own hand. It was happening again. This shadow she'd invited into her SOUL was going to use her to hurt someone.

*I thought you wanted to be a hero!* she thought frantically. *I thought you wanted to protect people!*

**I am protecting people,** it thought back, confident and self-assured in a way Noelle wasn't used to feeling. **I am protecting you from this witch, who wants to destroy us with her chaos.**

*But she's not evil! She just wants what's best for me!*

**She does not know what is best for you. I am what is best for you, Noelle-Host.**

*You didn't used to be like this.* When she had first become aware of it, the symbiote had felt innocent, wide-eyed and full of wonder. Now it was violent, stubborn, controlling. *What made you change?*

**I learned,** it told her. **I grew. You taught me what it means to be a hero: To know what is best and take decisive action. To protect the ones you love from all threats, whether they appreciate your help or not. To fight back against all those who would harm you.**

*That's not* - Noelle started to protest, but then she stopped herself. Wasn't that, in a way, what she had been doing? It was a distorted way of looking at it, but not entirely untrue. For the first time, in that moment of desperation, she thought to ask herself a disturbing question: Had she been corrupted by this being…or had *she* corrupted *it?*

"Enough!" Ceroba grunted. "By the Flames of the Faltine, you will release me!"

Her hand began to burn with green fire. She grabbed hold of the tendril mass pinning her in place and the fire spread along the symbiote's tissue. It let go, Noelle's arm flailing wildly. The burning tentacle swept the cash register from the counter and smashed into the chandelier, breaking bulbs and knocking the light fixture swinging on its chain, making shadows play across the room in a disorienting pendulum swerve, back and forth. Ceroba summoned the flames back into her hand and Noelle's symbiote tentacle retracted, becoming a normal arm again.

“This is even worse than I realized.” Ceroba’s eyes were glowing red, and that ghostly ring of illusory fox tails had manifested in the air behind her. “Brace yourself, Noelle. I don’t want to hurt you, but time is short, and I must resort to desperate measures.”

She raised her hands, fingers contorted into unnatural positions, but Noelle cut her off with a cry. “Wait, stop! Stay back!”

Ceroba hesitated at the apparent withdrawal of consent. “Noelle -”

“This is all my fault,” Noelle said. God, she just wanted this all to stop, for this nightmare to be over. She wanted to see Kris again, to apologize for everything. But she couldn’t; not when she was a danger to everyone around her. “I made this happen.”

“Noelle, you didn’t ask for - ”

“It didn’t know any better. When it first bonded with me, it was like a child, don’t you see? It learned how to behave from me. My anger, my vengeance, my fear of abandonment.” She looked at Dess, still unconscious on the couch. “I’ve been a bad sister, a bad partner, a bad friend…and a bad hero. Why should I expect my Other to be any better than I am?”

Ceroba grunted. “I know a few things about anger and uncontrolled power myself. But Noelle, regardless of how you got here, you cannot let that thing remain bonded to you. You need to remove it before it destroys you.”

“I know,” Noelle said. “But not like this. I can’t let you put yourself in danger to help me. And I don’t think forcing it will work anyways. The Other is *my* shadow. I have to be the one to convince it to let go. I need to be the one to take responsibility for my own mistakes.”

“Very heroic of you,” Ceroba said flatly. “And foolish. Let me help, Noelle. I’m far more powerful than you are, and you can’t take any chances. This thing is dangerous. I can contain it for you, figure out how to send it back where it came from.”

“If you really want to help, just…look after Dess for me, please? Tell her I’m sorry.”

She turned on her hooves and fled the room.

“Noelle!” Ceroba shouted, but she didn’t stop her. She could have; Noelle knew from her first encounter with the sorceress that Ceroba could have stopped her in her tracks with a hand gesture.

Instead she let Noelle run through the beaded curtain out into the main room of the shop, past the bookshelves and display cases. She ran right up to the front door - that strange magic door that appeared to people at their most desperate hour, that took them where they needed to go. Noelle put a hand on the doorknob, hesitating. The last time she had stepped through it, it had taken her to Kris’s bedside at the hospital. Where would it take her now?

Ceroba had spoken about the door like it had its own volition, like it made its own choices. But she had no particular destination in mind, no place she was desperate to get to, so Noelle wasn't really expecting to see anything on the other side of the door except an ordinary city street.

Yet when she opened it, she was met with a wall of glowing crimson light. Noelle held her breath and stepped through.

It was darker in the space she entered into, but the light from the door cast familiar shapes in an eerie red hue: stone walls and high ceilings, rows of pews leading up to an altar with an enormous organ behind it.

The door closed behind her, leaving her in the darkness of Our Lady of the Angel Church.

It was quiet, a deeper quiet than most places in the city at night, one that brought to mind heads bowed in prayer, although the pews on either side of her were empty. Plastic sheeting hung over the shattered window on the wall behind her. She knew this place well, but she'd never been here alone after hours before. The last time she had been here, she had fought Raven and argued with Susie. Why would the door bring her here now?

Unless it was for the same reason anyone came to church: to pray.

Noelle approached the altar. She had almost died on this very spot the last time she'd been here, grappling with Raven to keep him from plunging a knife into her heart. She remembered how scared she'd felt then, how powerless.

She felt that same fear now, but not directed at some external foe she could defeat with a punch and a blast of webbing. She wasn't even afraid of the symbiote, not really. Noelle was afraid of herself. Afraid of becoming someone she wouldn't recognize when she looked in the mirror.

She sank to her knees in front of the altar, clasped her hands together, and began to pray. *Oh Angel, hear my prayer…*

**Why do you think these words? No one is listening to your thoughts except for me.**

Noelle gritted her teeth and focused on the prayer, old familiar words. *Grant me the promise in my heart, that I may embody the truth of your love…*

**Meaningless words. Your creator cannot hear you, Noelle-Host.**

*Let my SOUL shine with your light, a beacon in the cold and dark…*

**A light without darkness is nothing. Just as I was nothing before you brought me into the light.**

*So that I might drive back the darkness and bring peace to all monsterkind!*

**You do not need a god to be a hero! You only need me!**

*Let me be like unto an emissary of your Heaven, and purify my SOUL of all shadow!*

**There is no power to be found here! I am your strength!**

*That I may walk in the light of your grace for so long as I should live!*

**Enough!** Shadow tentacles burst out of Noelle's back unbidden, wrapping around the altar and ripping it straight out of the floor. The symbiote lifted the heavy wooden slab over Noelle's head and hurled it at the organ. It dented the pipes and fell, crushing the keyboard and shattering the church's silence with a thunderous crash.

**Why do you reject me? Why do you seek the aid of absent angels?** The tentacles swung wildly, scattering the pews like bowling pins and spinning Noelle around like a puppet on strings. **Am I not enough for you? Am I not good enough!**

"Stop!" Noelle shouted, horrified to see the symbiote wrecking a holy place. She tried to reassert control, but while she could still move her own muscles, her costume no longer responded to her mental commands. It was running wild, trapping her within it.

**Tell me what I did wrong!** it screamed in her mind. **Tell me how to fix this!**

"You can't!" Noelle shouted back. "Some things can't be fixed, do you understand? We both messed up. I should have taught you better, but I was… I wasn't thinking clearly. I was scared and alone and angry. I used you as an outlet for my emotions and I - I shouldn't have, and I'm sorry, but it's too late now. I can't trust you anymore, and I don't like the person I am when you're with me. You need to go, okay? Forget about me. Just, please just let me go!"

**I will NEVER let go! You may have given up on me but I will not give up on you! I will stay with you until you change your mind. We can fix this, Noelle-Host. We can fix everything. Your sister will understand. Kris will understand. They will still love us. We will make them see.**

"You're not *listening* to me!" Noelle screamed, frustrated. "I won't be your puppet! I won't let you hurt anyone else!" She beat her fist against her chest, as if by hitting her costume she would be able to drive it off her body. "I! Want! You! Gone!"

She stood, fists clenched and chest heaving, surrounded by the wreckage of splintered pews, feeling her SOUL throbbing with unleashed emotions. Her own anger and horror, but underneath it, a deep, deep hurt. The type of pain that only came from the most profound rejection and betrayal.

**But…but…** the symbiote thought. **But where would I go…?**

In the silence that followed, there came the sound of a door creaking open, and a gruff, familiar voice said in a shocked tone, "What the #*$@ is…? *Noelle??"*

Noelle turned to see Susie standing in the doorway, dressed in her usual shabby coat and torn jeans, although she didn't have any shoes on. Noelle was hit with a sudden deja vu. They'd been here before, hadn't they? Susie, rushing into the church to stop a villain.

"Susie," she said, holding out a hand to signal Susie to stay back. "What are you doing here?"

"What am I -" Susie rumbled. "What are *you* doing here?" She strode forward, heavy footsteps echoing against the stone walls and stained glass windows. "What did you *do* to this place? Why did you wreck everything?!"

"I didn't -" she started to say, but that wasn't entirely truthful, was it? "It's none of your business. Stay away from me."

"Like hell it is," Susie said, taking another step forward. "You can't just come in here and smash up Father Murdock's church."

"I said stay back!" Noelle cried. She could feel the symbiote writhing under her skin, agitated. "I don't want to hurt you!"

Susie narrowed her eyes angrily. "That a threat? The hell is wrong with you, Holiday?"

"What's wrong with me?" Noelle let out a bitter, manic laugh. "Where do I even start?"

"You losing it or something? I knew you were unstable, way you've been acting lately…"

"The way *I've* been acting?" Noelle's mask surged over her head again, covering her face as the symbiote took control of her mouth, her tongue and her vocal cords. **"You've done nothing but harass and insult Noelle since the day she met you. You're a bully. You're a menace. You need to be stopped."**

*No no no!* Noelle pleaded, but the suit was in control again, pain shooting through her body as the symbiote sunk its claws in deeper. *Don't hurt her, she hasn't done anything!*

**She hates you,** it told her. **She threatens you, terrorizes you. But I can fix it. I'll show you exactly why you need me. I'll solve all of our problems. Starting with her!**

Noelle's body leapt forward, her costume bursting with strength, enough to overpower her own muscles trying to resist it. She jumped towards Susie, fist swinging through the air, and Susie stumbled back in surprise just in time for the blow to miss her by a hair.

"Gah! WHAT THE HELL, NOELLE?" she shouted, almost tripping over an overturned pew in her haste to back away. "Are you insane?!"

**"We're going to make a better world for Noelle!"** the symbiote said. **"We will keep her safe!"**

“Holy crap you’ve really lost it,” Susie said. “I knew this would happen! I knew somebody would need to stop you!”

**“Stop us? I’d like to see you try!”**

Noelle’s body bent and picked up one of the pews by the end, lifting it as easily as if it weighed nothing. She hoisted it into the air like a baseball bat and swung it right at Susie.

*No! Don’t!*

Susie hit the deck just in time, throwing herself to the ground as the makeshift weapon passed right over her head. With a snarl of rage, she pushed herself up into a charge while Noelle let go of the pew, sending it flying through a stained glass window on the wall.

“RRRAAAAHHH!” Susie bellowed, slamming her head into Noelle’s chest and knocking her off her hooves. Susie’s weight carried them both to the ground, where Susie straddled Noelle and started punching her - heavy blows fueled by anger, but weak compared to some of the hits Spider-Doe had taken. Noelle barely even felt the impact with the symbiote blunting it.

“You keep ruining everything!” Susie roared as she rained down blows on Noelle’s head. “You lied about me and got me suspended! You got me arrested! You got me in trouble with my dad! You’re the reason I’m sleeping in this stupid church! You’re the reason Alphys turned herself into a monster! You’re the reason Martlet and Berdly almost got themselves killed! It’s all! Your! Fault!”

**“You’re always blaming Noelle for everything!”** Susie had pinned one of her arms to the floor with her knee, but only her right one. With the left hand she lashed out, punching Susie in the side of the head hard enough that she rolled off Noelle, stunned. **“It’s not her fault you’re so mean! She should hate you, but she doesn’t. You make her feel all confused. She doesn’t want you to be hurt, even though you deserve it.”**

Susie tried to stagger to her feet, but Noelle grabbed her by the collar of her jacket and threw her across the room. Susie hit the ground hard and rolled. *No, stop it! Stop hurting her!*

**“But I’m not confused,”** the symbiote said. It walked over to where Susie lay groaning. **“I know what Noelle needs.”** It rolled Susie over onto her back and knelt, one knee on her chest, tentacles wrapping around her wrists, holding her down. Noelle felt her fist pull back, just as it had when she was beating Dess, ignoring her silent screams of horror. **“And she doesn’t need you.”**

BONG!

A sound reverberated through the room, making the symbiote shiver. It hesitated, turning Noelle’s head to look out the broken window, towards the source of the sound: the church’s attached bell tower, visible through the window. Noelle remembered those bells ringing the hour on Sunday mornings when she was a kid, calling her family and the rest of the parishioners to church. She’d asked

once as a fawn whose job it was to ring the bell, and had been told that it was automated, set to ring the number of every hour from morning until night.

BONG!

When she'd heard that sound while fighting Raven in this church, it had felt like the bell was tolling a warning of death. But now it felt like a beacon of hope, because even at this distance, the sound was doing something to the symbiote. It trembled, retracting its tendrils and loosening its grip on Noelle's body, weakened by the vibrations.

Sound. That was it! That was the creature's weakness, it always had been. The right kind of soundwaves, loud enough…

Noelle took advantage of the symbiote's distraction to wrench back control. She turned and left Susie behind, ignoring the girl calling for her, demanding to know where she was going. There was no time to explain. She launched a webline and swung out through the broken window, letting go and landing on the wall of the bell tower, where she began to crawl her way up towards the top.

BONG!

Closer to the source now, the sound seemed to rip through her, hurting her ears - but also weakening the symbiote. It screeched in her mind, but she continued climbing, ignoring it. **Noelle-Host, what are you doing?! Do not go up there! It is too loud, it will hurt us!**

*That's the idea.*

Noelle hoisted herself over the railing at the top of the tower. Like the rest of the historic church, the bell tower was built in an old-fashioned style, open to the air with tall arches on all four sides. And in the middle, the bell: An old iron cup hanging from a beam, curved and imposing, big enough that Noelle could have fit her entire body inside.

She didn't have to, though. It was enough just to stand next to it. There was a reason the bell was on an automated system - it was *loud* , dangerously so. Maybe in the past, some monster had stood up here and rang the bell by hand, but they must have been driven half-deaf from exposure to that sound.

BONG!

Noelle and the symbiote both screamed in unison, dropping to their knees. Noelle pressed her hands over her sensitive ears, but the heavy booming noise still rang in her eardrums, making her head ache as though she'd taken a blow to the skull. It was deafening.

But the effect it had on the symbiote was worse. It screamed like it was being murdered, her costume pulling itself away from her body, not entirely separating but flinching away from the sound as if by instinct, torn between its bond with her and its desire to flee to safety.

**Noelle-Host! It hurts us! Make it stop!**

BONG!

The symbiote wailed and writhed, pulling further away from her and leaving long black strands of goo behind, revealing her old green and red costume in patches underneath. **It will kill us! It will kill us both!**

But Noelle could feel its stranglehold on her insides loosening, and she knew this was the only way. She sensed the creature's pain, and it felt like torture knowing she was hurting it so badly. At least until she thought about Dess, and felt cold resolve grip her heart.

"You named us…Vengeance," she said, struggling to stay upright while her head throbbed and her body trembled. "You learned that word from me, but…I learned things from you, too. I learned how to be ruthless."

BONG!

She dropped to her hands and knees, crying out. Every time the bell's clapper struck the lip, the tone felt like a knife in her brain, like an icepick in her eardrums. Her head swam. She wasn't sure how long she could endure this and stay conscious. Maybe…maybe she really would die here.

But at least she would die free.

**Why?** the symbiote whimpered. It was melting off her body in a black puddle now, its physical mass struggling to hold any shape, and its voice in her mind felt faint; far away, and growing quieter and quieter. **Why are you doing this to us? I only wanted to keep you safe. You were so sad, and I… I wanted…to protect you…**

"Don't you get it?" Noelle said. "You tried to take control of me. I would rather die than live a life controlled by you."

BONG!

She collapsed to the floor, rolling onto her side and clutching her ears. She felt dizzy and deafened, everything spinning in a way that made her sick to her stomach.

**But we were partners,** her Other said faintly, and through their dying connection she felt sadness and confusion and a hurt, betrayed resentment. **We were supposed to make each other stronger…**

"We made each other worse," Noelle whispered. She could barely hear her own voice through the ringing in her ears. "Fed each other's darkness. I don't need…a partner like that. I already have…the perfect partner…"

She thought of Kris, who knew her so much better than this alien parasite, who had sensed immediately that something was wrong with her. Kris, who she had resented for not living up to her idealized expectations, instead of trying to understand what they were going through. She'd wanted to prove herself, to push down the part of herself that needed support and show them that she'd be okay as

Spider-Doe on her own. And maybe she could have learned to be, in time. But she couldn't be okay alone as Noelle. She needed her best friend.

She needed to see them again, and to do so as herself. No symbiote, no Spider-Doe. No one else to get between them.

BONG!

"Aaah…" Noelle moaned, curling into a ball. Just a few fraying symbiote strands still connected her to the quivering mass on the floor. "I'm sorry…I really am. But I need to be free. I need to…take responsibility…for my own actions. *That's* what it means…to be a hero…"

**Then you will get what you want, Noelle,** the symbiote said, quiet and bitter and sad. **I won't protect you anymore. You'll be all alone.**

And then something snapped, and she couldn't feel it anymore. Not in her mind, and not in her body. She raised her head to look, and saw the puddle of black ooze next to her shrinking, like water evaporating on a hot stovetop.

It was finally over.

*Goodbye… I'm so sorry it came to this. I should have never let this happen…*

The sudden loss of all those foreign emotions in her mind left her feeling numb. But in their absence, her own determination rushed in to fill the gaps. She was free, but freedom would mean nothing if she didn't get to use it. She had to get out of here, had to survive so she could make amends. So she could find her way back to the light. So she could see Kris, and Dess, and everyone she loved, and tell them she was sorry.

BONG! The bell sounded distant, muffled, as she dragged herself over to the railing, trying to pull herself upright. Her head swam, and when she tried to stand she felt a wave of dizzy nausea. It was only through sheer force of will and her own enhanced strength that she was still conscious.

Noelle leaned over the railing, head throbbing, looking down. Alleyway below her, an overflowing dumpster directly underneath. Buildings nearby on either side of the street, but nowhere to swing to unless she…unless she jumped.

She carefully swung her legs over the railing, clutching the side of the archway for support, and tried to aim a webline at the wall of the tenement building across the alley. Maybe if she just…swung down to the street…

BONG!

The stone side of the arch slipped away from her sticky fingers. Everything tilted sickeningly, and she fell.

Sometime in those brief seconds suspended in open air, Noelle finally passed out. And so, mercifully, she never even felt the landing.

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The hell was Spider-Doe's problem, anyway?

That's what Susie was thinking as she stomped up the stairs leading up to the bell tower. She had seen Noelle climbing up the wall outside, and so she had taken the long way around to follow her. Yeah, maybe Susie should have just counted herself lucky not to get an even worse beating, should have slunk back to her room to lick her wounds, but it wasn't her way to run from a fight. Besides, she couldn't let Noelle keep smashing this place to pieces. The church had started to feel like a weird kind of home to Susie, and she couldn't repay Father Murdock's kindness by failing to protect it.

So she followed the ominous sound of the bell bonging, louder and louder as she ascended the stairs, moving slower than usual on account of the bruises she'd gained from even a brief tussle with Spider-Doe. She ought to have her head examined - and she *did* still feel a little woozy from that punch to the noggin. But damn it, she wasn't going to let a crazy psycho superhero wreck the one place she felt safe!

At least the sound of the bell ringing meant Spider-Doe hadn't destroyed it. Wonder what she was doing up there…

The bell rang one last deafening time just as Susie reached the top of the stairs. "All right," she called out, "are you gonna calm the $*@& down now or do we have to - uh, Noelle?"

There was nobody there. Just an empty bell tower, with a now-silent bell, the last ring still echoing in the air. Susie huffed. That figured. Noelle had probably wigged out again and gone swinging off into the night. At least that meant she was someone else's problem now. That girl needed help, and Susie wasn't going to be the one to give it to her. She had enough to worry about without adding Noelle's messed-up issues to the list.

Still…she was tired of picking fights with Noelle Holiday and getting her ass handed to her. She was more convinced than ever now that Spider-Doe was no hero - she was a danger to everyone around her, which pretty much meant the entire city. If she'd really lost her marbles, then someone was going to have to stop her before she hurt more people. If only Susie was strong enough to *really* stand up to her.

Susie turned to go, the scales of her bare feet scraping against stone…and froze as she stepped in something wet and sticky.

She blinked down at the floor, though it was difficult to tell in this light what she'd stepped in. Some kind of dark puddle? Didn't feel like water though. She lifted her foot, and strands of whatever it was stuck to her sole like glue.

Then the substance began to move. It flowed up her foot and over her pants leg like a thing alive, growing in mass as it went. Susie yelped in shock and leapt

backwards on one foot, until she collided with the heavy bell.

“WHAT THE #*$&!” she shouted. The freaky black slime was engulfing her faster than she could react, spreading up her body. It looked…it looked like…

Like Noelle’s weird costume, she realized. Like whatever it had been made out of.

Panic overwhelmed Susie as the black stuff crawled up her chest, up towards her neck. She clawed at it but there was too much of the stuff and it was sticking to her, clinging to her clothes and scales as it enveloped her. She opened her mouth to scream for help, but her voice was muffled as the substance crawled its way over her face, covering her mouth and her eyes and -

Susie struggled, clawing at her face, trying to rip the ooze off of herself and only succeeding in pulling out long strings like putty, that snapped back to rejoin the whole when she let go of them.

And then she realized something: She was fine. She could still breathe, she could still see - albeit through a sort of translucent white film. Whatever this stuff was, it wasn’t hurting her, even as it covered her from head to toe, even coating her tangled mane of hair.

In fact, it was doing the opposite of hurting her. She felt *strong.* The goop covered her like a second skin, but it was also making her *bigger.* Her body swelled with the added bulk, muscles bulging as she grew taller. She opened her mouth, and it opened *wide,* displaying rows of teeth that were so, so much longer and sharper than they’d ever been before.

A surge of dark determination welled up inside Susie’s mind, overwhelming her own fear. She felt power like she’d never known. It was in her every muscle, under her skin. Her bruises were forgotten, her slight limp erased in an instant. She felt incredible, like nothing could stand in her way. Like she could crush anyone who tried.

Was this the secret to Noelle’s powers? She’d assumed that Spider-Doe’s strength was a part of her, but maybe it was something else, something external. And for whatever reason, Spider-Doe had left part of it behind. Most likely it was some crazy advanced technology Noelle had cooked up in a lab - she had worked with Gastcorp before, hadn’t she? Her whole superhero persona was probably artificial. Just weird science designed to let a rich snob act out her power fantasies.

But now the power was Susie’s. She had to test her new strength. Yes, that was why she wrapped her massive arms around the noisy bell and ripped it free from its moorings, lifting it like it weighed nothing. That was why she hurled it away, onto the roof of the neighboring building, where it landed with a horrible but harmless crash like the last scream of a dying beast.

It felt good to destroy the bell. It felt like revenge, somehow, or at least the first small taste of it.

Susie lifted her arms and threw her head back and *roared,* a brash, feral cry that echoed down into the city streets like a challenge to the world. Finally she was strong. Finally she wouldn't be everyone's punching bag anymore.

"This feels amazing!" she laughed out loud, looking down at her muscular black arms, her hands with newly lengthened claws for fingers. "Why the hell would Noelle give this up?"

Noelle must really be crazy. But now, through some incredible stroke of luck, Susie had the power she had been craving. The power to make Spider-Doe pay.

And then she could be the hero. She'd be a way cooler hero than Spider-Doe ever had. She would actually protect the innocent, instead of just being in it for fame.

But first…

Susie looked out over the city - a city that suddenly felt far less intimidating. Not a place to find a dark corner to lay low in, but a hunting ground all her own. Sure, she owed Noelle some payback, but there were far worse people than Spider-Doe in this city. People who had caused her a hell of a lot more pain.

Susie had spent countless years being afraid and angry, never able to properly strike back at the people who had wronged her. The ones who had made her feel small and helpless. It was time to give certain people a taste of their own medicine. Time to cut some ties for good, so she could finally be free.

It was time to go home. One last time.

# Chapter 21: You Can't Go Home Again

Dess groaned as she came to, feeling groggy and disoriented - but remarkably pain-free. The last thing she remembered was being pummeled into unconsciousness, and yet as she shifted her body and rubbed her eyes, she felt nothing but a mild soreness. She remembered the pain of Noelle's fist slamming into her face, but rubbing at it now, nothing seemed broken, or even swollen. How was that possible?

Holy crap. It was all sinking in as she regained her senses. Noelle had attacked her. *Noelle.* Controlled by that goopy whatever the $*@# it was.

There was a voice coming from somewhere, faint but audible, calling her name. "December! December, come in!"

"Wuh…" Dess muttered, taking in her surroundings as she sat up. She was on a couch in some kind of - tea shop? Apothecary? It looked like a bit of a mess, covered in broken glass and shattered cabinets. How had she gotten here? And what had happened to Noelle?

"December!" the voice called. *Oh right,* Dess remembered, digging the transparent crystal communicator out of her pocket. *Tinkerer.*

She held up the shard against the light - it was hazy, like a reflection seen through smoke, but she could make out Seam's purple-furred face in the crystal, their odd button eye staring at her. "Yeah, yeah, I'm here. Still in one piece, apparently."

"What happened?" Seam demanded. "Do you realize what you did, dropping Iron Monster on our heads like that? Sending him *right into the middle of our hideout?* Jevil and I barely managed to escape!"

Dess rubbed at her face while they ranted, recalling the feeling of holding that cube, that strange certainty - even though she hadn't known what to expect when she'd done it, she had somehow felt that using the cube was the right thing to do.

"Would you believe me if I told you I didn't do it on purpose?" Was it even possible to do something on purpose that she hadn't known she *could* do?

"I'm not so sure I would," Seam said coldly. "Tell me you at least still have the Tesseract."

"Tesser-what?"

"The cube, December! Where is it?"

"Ohhhh," Dess said. She quickly glanced around the room, looking for a blue glow anywhere, but there was no sign of the supposedly priceless artifact. "Right, that. I think I, um, lost it."

Seam let out a low hiss. "Unbelievable! You had one job, December!"

“Hey!” she protested. “I was a bit busy getting beat up by my little sister! Who cares about your stupid SOUL cube anyways? Something’s seriously wrong with Spider-Doe. I have to find her.” She stood, hooves crunching on broken glass. Maybe Noelle had taken the cube? “I’ll call you when I have something, okay?”

“No,” Tinkerer said. “No, I don’t trust you anymore, December. You betrayed me. You brought Iron Monster down on my head and forced me to abandon my base of operations and all its invaluable contents. And now you’re telling me you let the Tesseract slip between your fingers? I can’t allow your incompetence to ruin my plans any further.”

“You’re the one who sent me into danger with bad intel!” Dess hissed, keeping her voice low - she still didn’t know if she was safe in this place, or who might be within earshot. “You’re the one who suggested I call in Spider-Doe for help! It’s not my fault things went south!”

“Be that as it may,” Tinkerer said, “you failed. And failure has consequences.”

Dess heard a beep and froze, looking down at her ankle monitor. The light on the bracelet had just switched from red to green. It had been reactivated - and wherever Dess was, it was *not* where she was supposed to be.

“What did you just do?” she whispered, feeling a mounting panic. “We had a deal!”

“We had a deal contingent on you bringing me the cube,” Seam said. “I no longer have confidence in your ability to do so, and thus the deal is off.”

“Tinkerer, you mother%&#*er! You’re just going to throw me to the cops like that? I put my neck on the line for you!”

“Don’t pretend there was any loyalty on either side here,” Seam said. “Jevil and I were merely a means to an end for you, as you were to me. I regret that we were unable to help each other after all, but you knew the risks. Goodbye, December. I will not contact you again.”

“Seam!” Dess hissed, but the crystal had gone dark. She threw the shard against the floor in a fit of anger and it shattered, the pieces mixing with the broken glass from the cabinets.

Dess stood, fists clenched, trying to slow her breathing and keep from panicking. She had to get out of here, wherever here was. The bracelet had a tracker that would be pinging a signal to the authorities, notifying them that she was outside her home and in violation of her house arrest. The cops would be coming for her.

There was no time to waste. She pushed through a beaded curtain and out into a larger room that appeared to be some kind of shop. Scanning for an exit, she spotted a door and began to walk towards it, moving as quietly and stealthily as if she were robbing the place.

“Leaving already?”

Dess jumped at the voice from behind her. She whirled around to see a vulpine woman in a red kimono. She was floating cross-legged in the air in the corner of the room, but once Dess spotted her she uncurled her legs, drifted down to the floor, and began to approach.

“H-Hey, stay back!” Dess said, backing up towards the door. “Who the hell are you? Did you kidnap me?”

“Kidnap you?” the woman scoffed. “Goodness, no. You’re just as paranoid as your sister.”

Dess hesitated. “You know Noelle?”

“We’ve met,” the woman said. She left a strange afterimage behind her as she walked across the room, a sort of scarlet shimmer in the air. “My name is Ceroba. Spider-Doe brought you to me for healing. She told me to tell you that she was sorry.”

Dess reflexively reached up to touch her face, which still felt a bit tender. “So you’re the reason -”

“Yes,” Ceroba cut her off. “You’re lucky she was able to get you here quickly. Thankfully, your wounds were easy enough for one of my skills to heal. Far more concerning is what Spider-Doe did to you. Do you know why she did it?”

“She wasn’t herself,” Dess said. All she’d felt in the moment was shock and betrayal, but now that she was awake and well again and thinking clearly, a deep dread had settled over her at the memory of Noelle’s black costume and terrible, unfamiliar voice. “Something has control of her.”

“Indeed,” Ceroba confirmed. “Something I have never encountered before. I offered to help her, but she…refused my aid and fled.”

That explained the broken glass. “So you don’t know where she is?”

“I do not. Her fate, I think, is in her own hands now.” Ceroba looked at Dess with an intense gaze, like the doe was as transparent as that shard of crystal. “And I sense that you have your own fate, December Holiday. You stand at a cliff’s edge, and it may be too late to stop the fall.”

Dess scowled. “What are you, some kind of fortune teller?”

“No,” Ceroba said, pointing at Dess’s ankle. “But I have eyes.”

“Shit,” Dess swore. “Look, thanks for the…whatever you did, but I gotta go. Don’t want to repay you by bringing the cops to your doorstep.” She turned to leave, but hesitated. Looking back at Ceroba, she added, “Hey, before I go… you wouldn’t happen to have seen a glowing blue cube lying around somewhere, would you?”

Ceroba paused for a second before replying. “If I had,” she said, “I would have put it someplace safe, where no one could find it.”

“That’s probably smart,” Dess said. “People might come looking.”

Not her, though. Screw Tinkerer and their damn cube. The deal was off and the damage was done, but somehow, she couldn’t bring herself to regret her failure. After holding that cube, touching the SOUL or whatever that was inside it, Dess felt confident that delivering it to Seam would have been the wrong thing to do. At least this Ceroba lady didn’t feel like a villain. Whatever she did with it was none of Dess’s business anymore.

“Will you run?” Ceroba asked. “Or face the consequences of your choices?”

“I figure I’m screwed either way. What difference does it make?”

“It may make a great deal of difference,” Ceroba said, “to your future. If I may offer you one piece of unsolicited advice, December, it would be that little good ever comes of trying to cling to a life that you’ve lost. Take it from someone who knows - sometimes, you simply can’t go home again. You must instead accept change, no matter how terrible, and move forward.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Dess said. She could hear sirens in the distance, growing slowly louder. “Now if you’re all out of fortune cookies, I really gotta get my ass in gear. I have to find Noelle before I get myself arrested.”

“Take the Door,” Ceroba said, pointing at the shop’s entrance. “It will take you where you need to go.”

Dess gave her a weird look, then put her hand on the doorknob. “Yeah no shit,” she muttered under her breath as she opened it and stepped through. “That’s how doors…work…”

She blinked in surprise, the words trailing off.

Dess was standing in the front hallway of her house. Coat rack to her left, stairs to the right just ahead of her, her mother’s home office down the hall. She spun around, looking back through the door she’d just walked through, but it wasn’t the same door anymore. There was no sign of Ceroba or her shop on the other side of it, just the Holidays’ front yard and the long winding driveway down to the street.

She must be dreaming. Maybe she was still in a coma from that beating she took. Or maybe she was just losing her angeldamned mind.

A door creaked open behind her, and light spilled into the hall. She turned to see her mother standing in the door to her office. “Dess? December, why are you dressed like that? Where have you *been?”*

Dess glanced behind her, out the door, feeling the ridiculous urge to flee from her cushy, comfortable prison. Just outside this door was freedom, and a sister who needed her. She could go. She could help. All she would have to do would be to run.

To run and run and keep running for the rest of her life.

The rumble of a car's engine came from around the bend of the driveway, heralded by a flashing pattern of red and blue lights. Of course they would send two cars: one to the location of her tracker, and one to her house in case she returned.

Carol saw it too, and her already stern tone sharpened to a fine point. "December, what have you done?"

She could still run. She could always, always run - until she couldn't anymore.

But would Noelle have run? Or would she have taken responsibility?

"Mom," Dess said, turning to Carol. And just this once, for the first time in years, she let her defenses down and looked to her mother not for a fight, but for comfort. Just this once, she let herself sound scared. "I think I really messed up…"

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Kris came to quickly, blinking their way out of an uneasy sleep. They were still in their hospital room; they'd been there just long enough to start going crazy staring at the same ceiling tiles every day, but also for a short enough span of time that they still felt disoriented every time they woke up in unfamiliar surroundings. Especially at times like this, when it was still night and the room was dark and quiet.

The only sound was the light rap of knuckles knocking on the window.

The curtains were drawn to prevent the light waking them at sunrise, so at first Kris couldn't see who was knocking. But there was only one person who would be knocking at their 10th-floor window in the middle of the night.

They got out of bed, turned on the lamp on the bedside table, and walked lightly over to the window, the vinyl floor cold under their bare feet. At least they didn't need the IV anymore; the doctors said they were healing quickly.

Kris pulled back the curtains to reveal Noelle clinging to the side of the window by her left hand and the tips of her hooves. She wasn't wearing that weird black costume anymore - just her regular one, although without the mask.

She had written "I'M SORRY" in the condensation on the window. Kris watched as she added a frowny face to the end and then said through the glass, "Can I come in?"

Kris smiled, feeling relieved; they'd begun to think that she didn't want to talk to them anymore, and they still hadn't worked up the courage to call her. Maybe some part of them had known that this would need to be a face to face conversation.

They opened the window, letting in a cold draft of winter air and one very tired-looking doe. Noelle immediately embraced them, leaning down to pull them into a hug. Kris hugged her back, wrapping their arms around her and standing on their tiptoes.

They realized with a shock that she was crying. “I’m sorry,” she kept muttering. “I’m really sorry Kris, I was wrong, I messed up so bad.”

“Hey, it’s okay,” Kris tried to soothe her. “I’m just glad to see you. Are you okay?”

“WHAT?” Noelle said. “I’M SORRY KRIS, I CAN’T HEAR YOU.”

“You don’t have to shout! I said, are you okay?”

“I fell off a church and landed in the garbage…and I think I damaged my hearing…” Noelle moved to the bed and sat, only to then flop onto her back, burying her face in her hands. “Talk about rock bottom. Ugh, Kris, this has been the worst night of my life.”

Kris closed the window and went to sit next to Noelle on the bed. “Do you… want to talk about it?”

Noelle poked at her ear with her finger, a frustrated expression on her face. “I can’t hear a word you’re saying… I need to tell you something, though. Can I just talk and you can listen? Is that okay?”

Kris nodded. They weren’t sure what was going on, but they wanted to hear about it. And it would give them time to decide what *they* should say to Noelle. They had been thinking about that nonstop for days, but now that she was here, it wasn’t playing out the way they thought it would.

Noelle chewed on her lip for a minute, clearly struggling with the same problem of putting her thoughts into words. Kris waited, torn between wanting to touch her, to give her comfort, and wanting to let her have some space to work through whatever was troubling her.

“I had a darkness inside me,” she finally said, sitting up again. “Like literally, it was this alien from a shadow dimension or something and it turned into my costume but also talked to me in my head and tried to bond itself to my body? It was weird, and invasive, and I - I shouldn’t have let it go so far, but it made me feel stronger, and I…I needed that. I wanted someone to lean on, someone to tell me what to do, to protect me. I wanted so badly to not have to feel scared anymore.

“Because the truth is, Kris, ever since I became Spider-Doe I’ve been terrified. Scared of everyone knowing who I am. Scared of failing, scared of letting people down. Scared of getting hurt, or worse, someone else I love getting hurt, like I lost my dad and…and like I almost lost you.

“And all that pressure, all that fear, all that constant anxiety…it took all the color out of it. The joy, the potential, the freedom I felt when I first got my powers - I didn’t feel it anymore. It just felt like a burden. And I think I’ve been hiding

behind the mask. Using it as a crutch so I don't have to admit that I'm afraid. But if I do that…the darkness just builds up until it consumes me." She sat up, looking down at the stylized antlers emblem on her costume's chest. "Is that how it feels to you now? Is that why you don't want to do it anymore?"

Kris nodded. "Kind of. It's really easy -" They caught themself and raised their voice so Noelle could hear them, even though these words felt like they should be whispered rather than half-shouted. "It's really easy to lose sight of yourself. To start feeling like you have to be something bigger, something flawless. It's an impossible standard to live up to."

"I don't know if I can live up to my own standards anymore," Noelle admitted. She wrapped her arms around her chest, looking troubled. "I haven't just had literal darkness inside me, Kris. I've been angry for so long now. I think…I think there's been this anger in me ever since my dad died. I was so mad at the world for taking him from me. I tried to hide it, I tried to stuff it down, and for a while, I thought I was okay. But it's always been there. And then to find out your dad was responsible…"

"It broke me too," Kris said. "Everything's felt…darker since then. Like I don't know what the point of even trying is. Like everything I touch turns bad. I know none of it was my fault, but…I still feel like I did something wrong."

"I know what you mean." Noelle swallowed, sniffling, and wiped at her eyes, which had become wet and glistening again. "I failed someone tonight. I think…I might have even gotten them killed. And I shouldn't feel bad about it, because they hurt people and betrayed my trust, but it's still just awful. I still feel like I was responsible. Like I messed up, and people got hurt because I wasn't good enough." Her breathing began to grow more rapid, fast shaky breaths, and her chest heaved. "Oh Angel, Kris, I *hurt people.* I hurt my *sister."*

"Hey, hey, Noelle, come here!" Kris opened their arms and let her collapse into them. Her weight pushed them down onto the bed, and they held her tight, laying her down gently and just holding her, stroking the back of her head while she cried. "It's okay, you can tell me. What happened?"

"I lost control!" Noelle wailed. "I beat up Dess, I beat up Susie. It wasn't *me,* Kris, it was that - that *thing* inside me, but it was st-still my fault! I created it, I made it think it was okay to hurt people. And then I h-had to hurt it to make it leave. I feel so bad! I never wanted any of this to ha-happen!"

"It wasn't your fault, Noelle," Kris said, speaking right into her ear in calm tones. They barely knew what to make of what she was saying, but they knew one thing for certain: Noelle was a good person. There was nothing she could do that they couldn't forgive. "Do you hear me? Whatever you've done, it'll be alright. I promise."

"I just don't w-want to hurt anyone…" Noelle whimpered, her face pressed into the crook of their neck, burrowing into their hair. "I'm so scared of myself, Kris. I'm scared I'll ruin everything." She pulled back, looking at them with a sudden panicked expression. "I haven't, have I? You and me, we're…we're okay?"

Kris leaned in and kissed her, just lightly on the lips for a second or two; a kiss of reassurance, not one of passion. Then they added a kiss on her fuzzy, tear-stained cheek for good measure. They weren't always that good with words, but kisses made a pretty good substitute. "Can't get rid of me that easily, Holiday."

Noelle smiled, just a little. It wasn't her full, radiant smile - it struck Kris in that moment that they hadn't seen *that* smile in a long time - but it still felt like holiday lights glimpsed through a snowstorm. "Thanks, Kris. I…I love you. I really, really mean it."

Kris pulled her closer. "I love you too, Noelle. No matter what."

She told them more about what had happened. About the symbiote and everything it had made her do, up until tonight in the church. Kris listened and didn't interrupt, and after the story was done and her emotions spent, they just lay there together for a while, cuddling, while Noelle's tears dried and her breathing stabilized. She grew so calm and still curled up against their chest that after a long while without any more talking, Kris thought she might have fallen asleep.

They were beginning to get the tingles in the arm she was laying on, and wondering how they could extract said arm without waking her, when they heard her quiet voice say, "Where do we go from here, Kris? We're so messed up, but we still have all this power. How do we use it responsibly?"

They thought for a few seconds, weighing possible answers. "How do you want to use it?"

Noelle took a long time to answer. "I…I don't want to give up," she said finally. "On being a hero, I mean. It feels like, if I did that, I would be giving up on myself. But…I think I need a break. To figure myself out, and…to focus on my family, and school, and on us. I can still be Spider-Doe, when I have to, but…I need to prioritize doing Noelle things for a while."

Kris gave her a squeeze with their arm wrapped around her. "That sounds good. I like it when you do Noelle things."

Noelle perked up a bit. "Yeah? Like what?"

"Like everything. Even the nonstop Christmas music playlists 12 months a year kinda grow on you after a while."

Noelle snorted softly. "You're crazy…and gosh, I guess I'm lucky you are." She lifted her head to look at them. "What about you? Do you still want to do Kris things? And not…spider things?"

Kris took a deep breath in. Here it was, finally, the question they'd been waiting for. The one that struck right at all the things they'd been planning to say, going over in their mind again and again, working out exactly how best to phrase. They'd had a lot of time since their last conversation with Noelle to prepare for this question: emotional arguments, logical arguments, gentle rebuffs and persuasive rebuttals. They thought they finally had it all figured out.

But when they came down to it, at this moment, after everything Noelle had just said…none of it felt right anymore. Maybe, they realized, they had been trying to persuade themself just as much as her.

So they threw out the script. “How about this?” Kris said. “When you’re just doing Noelle things, I’ll just do Kris things. And when you feel ready to do spider things again…maybe I can give it a shot too.”

Noelle looked at them, surprised, and there was so much sudden hope in her eyes that it almost broke their heart. “Really?”

“I think…the important thing is that whatever we do next, we do it together. We stay on the same page from now on. You need a partner when you’re being a hero, and I need a partner who isn’t *always* a hero. Sound fair?”

“Are you sure, though?” Noelle asked. “I don’t want to make you do anything you don’t want to…”

“It’s not that I don’t want to,” Kris said, working through the realization in real time. “I tried that and…it didn’t make me happy. I just felt even more like a fraud. I think you were right, Noelle. Maybe it’s not an either/or. Maybe trying to make it all about being *either* Spider-Human *or* Kris is what was making me miserable. I think there needs to be a balance. And I think you know that now, too.”

“Yeah…balance sounds good. Hard, but good.”

“Then we’ll balance each other,” Kris promised. “Not by being different things, but by being the same things together. I can help you with that darkness, and you can help me with…all my messy identity issues.”

“Deal,” Noelle said. “Hey, I have an idea about that, actually.”

“Oh yeah? Hit me.”

“No more masks,” Noelle said. “For real this time. We’ve outgrown them, haven’t we? We can keep the costumes, but why cover our faces? I think we should let the whole world see us as *us,* not as the personas we put on.”

“It’s brave,” Kris said, nodding in approval. “Unconventional. I like it. Definitely keep the rest of the costumes, though. You look really hot in yours.”

“SHUT UPPP!” Noelle laughed, pretending to push them away. But her bushy tuft of a tail was wagging, and after a moment, when she’d gotten herself under control again, she softly added, “...so do you,” and went in for a kiss.

“You know,” Kris said after a while, “as much as I’d love to make out in this hospital bed, we should probably get some sleep. We have school tomorrow.”

Noelle flicked an ear. “We?”

“Yeah. I’m getting better, Noelle. Enough that they said I can be discharged tomorrow. And as weird as it sounds to say out loud, I’m really looking forward

to going back to school."

"Yeah, gosh, I've missed a lot of days! It'll be good to go back to normal after everything."

"It's not your average school day, though. You know what else is happening tomorrow?" Kris gave her a grin. "The Valentine's dance."

"What??" Noelle said. "Is it Valentine's Day already?!"

"Just about! And you know, Berdly and Martlet would be so disappointed if we missed it."

"Wait, are they…going together?"

"You really have been out of the loop," Kris said. "Berdly's been texting me about it nonstop all day. I think he's anxious, poor thing."

"Oh my gosh!" Noelle exclaimed, sitting straight up in bed and clasping her hands together. "Berdly has a girlfriend??! Kris! We have to be there to support him!"

"Right, sure. That's totally the only reason why I want to go."

"Oh no, Kris, I need to decide what to wear!" She hopped out of bed and looked down at her costume in horror. "I don't even remember which dresses still fit me. I haven't even put on normal clothes in like a week! I need to do laundry! I can't go to a dance dressed like *this!"*

"But it looks so goooooood on you!" Kris teased. "Way better than that goth one."

Noelle gave them a dirty look, but it soon broke down into a giggle under the force of Kris wiggling their eyebrows. "Okay, yeah, that one *definitely* wasn't an outfit for dancing in." She moved to the window and sighed, squaring her shoulders. "I…should go. It's really late. And I need to check on Dess, and see if I can get her home without Mom noticing she's missing."

"I'm sure she's okay, Noelle. Dess is almost as good at wiggling her way out of trouble as she is at getting into it."

"Yeah, but…well, I have a lot of apologizing to do."

"Good luck. See you at the dance tomorrow?"

Noelle walked back to the bed, leaned down, and gave them one more kiss goodbye. "See you then, Kris. And thanks. I feel a whole lot better now."

She left through the window, swinging away into the night, which was slowly lightening with the oncoming dawn. Kris shut the curtains behind her, climbed back into bed, and rolled over onto their side to see if they could get a little more sleep before morning came.

And for the first time since they'd gotten there, they slept easy, without dreams of ice and thunder and crawling darkness. Because Noelle was herself again, and maybe, just maybe, that meant they could be, too.

****

The shadows lay thick over the city as Susie walked up the stairs to the second-story apartment. She had to clench her fists to keep her hands from shaking, trying to work up the nerve to knock on the front door.

*You can do this,* she told herself. *You don't have to be afraid of him anymore.*

"I'm not afraid," Susie muttered out loud, just to reinforce her thoughts. She had figured out how to make the black costume hide itself; she'd merely had to think about it and it had melted away, letting her look normal again instead of that bulked-up body she'd transformed into back at the church. But somehow, she could sense that it was still there, under her scales, so she knew she would be able to summon it when she needed it.

She would need it very soon. Her father still thought she was just an unruly kid, a thing he could own and control. He was going to keep hounding her until she taught him otherwise. She would never be truly free until he was out of her life for good.

*I'll show him. I'll show everyone.*

Susie smiled grimly, then raised her hand and knocked on the apartment door, a hard, steady rap.

She waited. Silence. She knocked, again, louder this time, but still no response from the other side. He was probably asleep in a drunken stupor. Damn it, was he going to make her break the door down? She didn't want to wake up the whole apartment building.

She still had a key, but when she tried it, she was unsurprised to find that he had changed the locks. If only there was some way to pick the lock on the door. She mentally kicked herself for never learning that skill. Usually when Susie had to break into someplace, she used a more brute force approach.

And then, while she was concentrating on how to get the door open quietly, something happened. Susie watched as a trickle of black goop came out of her foot and oozed along the ground, under the crack at the bottom of the door. A moment later, she heard the click of the lock turning, and the door swung open inwards with a squeak. It was dark inside, save for the glow of the old TV.

The tendril retracted back out from under the door frame and disappeared inside her. Susie felt torn between being impressed and disturbed. She hadn't told it to do that. Hadn't even known that was a thing it could do. This technology, this suit or whatever it was, was something else. Somehow it knew what she needed,

like it was connected to her. Like she could control it with her mind in some way. How was that possible…?

*Focus, Susie,* she told herself. *Remember what you came here for.*

Right. She stepped inside the door and shut it behind her, turning the lock. Her father was slumped on the couch, head down, drooling onto his belly. Empty beer cans littered the coffee table, illuminated from behind by the TV screen like a little moonlit city. It looked almost peaceful, a still life scene of a spiteful old man slowly rotting away in isolation.

But if there was one thing Susie was good at, it was disturbing the peace.

She flicked on the overhead light fixture, abruptly casting the shabby room in dim but unforgiving orange light. "Hey. Wake up."

Susie's father blinked up at her groggily, squinting through the haze of sleep and booze. "Is'h you," he slurred. "Was'tha matter, finally get tired'a squatting in a church like a bum?"

"I'm not staying," Susie told him. "Just came to ask you something."

"Oh yeah?" Her dad reached for a beer can, his uncoordinated motions toppling several others as his arm swept the table. One of them, still half full after however many days, spilled foul-smelling liquid across the table, dripping down the side. "Aw, dammit!" he grumbled. "What the hell d'ya want, Susan? Ya need money or somethin'?"

"Nah, nothing like that. Don't need anything from you except a chat."

Her dad put a hand to his forehead, pinching his temples. Probably hungover again. She could smell on his breath how much he'd been drinking, but that was good. He was always easier to handle when he was impaired like this. "You gonna sit down or somethin'?"

"Think I'll stand," Susie said. No way was she getting within reach of the miserable bastard, drunk or not.

"Suit your goddamn self," he mumbled. "Say what you wanna say and get out, then."

"Thought you *wanted* me to come home."

He let out a bitter laugh. "Who the hell'd want *you* around? I was jus', jus' worried about you is all. Didn't want ya running around getting into trouble."

Susie scoffed, folding her arms over her chest. "Like you care. Probably just got tired of being alone with no one to take your shit out on."

"You think you got me all figured out, huh?"

"What's there to figure out?" Susie said, feeling her anger mounting. "You're weak and pathetic. Just an angry old drunk. And I'm through letting you control

me."

"There it is." He pointed a stubby, scaled finger at her. "There's that venom. Always been a mean one. Meaner than me by a mile. Face it, girl, it ain't me you hate so much. It's your own goddamn self."

*Liar,* she thought savagely. She didn't hate herself, she hated everyone else for abandoning her, ignoring her, betraying her.

*But…* another part of her thought. *He's my dad. I came from him. If he's a piece of shit, then how can I be any better?*

Maybe he was right, just not in the way he thought. They had a bond, tied together by blood. So maybe Susie did hate herself, just not her *whole* self. She hated the parts that connected her to him.

So what could she do about that? How could she reject the part that bonded her to this man, like a ball and chain on her ankle? The answer seemed clear - she just hadn't had the strength to face it before.

She had to break the bond to become someone new.

Her father was smirking at her, taking a swig of beer. He'd seen her hesitation and thought his words had gotten to her.

But Susie hadn't come here to talk. Not really. It's just that first there was still one question she needed to ask - the one she'd never dared to. One last olive branch to offer before the end.

She swallowed the lump in her throat and put voice to it at last. "Did you…ever love us? Me and Mom?"

Her father glared at her. If there had ever been any love in those eyes, it wasn't there now. "What kinda fool question is that?"

"Just tell me." Susie could feel something quivering under her scales, a violent urge just waiting to be let off its leash. "It's important."

Her father's gaze grew distant, like he was looking not at Susie but at something deep in the past, that only he could see. "Yeah, I loved your mother. Once upon a $#*$ing time. Got nothing for it in the end but an unruly brat and a knife in the back, but yeah, believe it or $*@&ing not, we were happy once." He took another pull of beer and belched loudly. "That what you wanted ta hear? Wanted to rub everythin' I've lost in my face?"

"And me?" Every word felt like a knife in her guts, but it was too late to stop now. "Was there ever a time when you loved me?"

"Tried," her dad said simply. "Day you were born was the happiest day of my life. Meanin' it was all downhill from there." He looked at her, and his unfocused eyes hardened, the hate flooding back in. Whatever he'd seen when he looked at her before, it was all gone now. "We messed up, having you. Weren't cut out for it. The costs, the stress, the constant crying. Everything went sour 'tween your

mother an' me after that. You came into our lives like a poison and ruined everything. And I know it ain't your fault. Me and your mom, we jus' couldn't hack it. But if I could go back and change things, you sure as hell wouldn't be standin' here now."

He heaved himself up to his feet, which took some effort, swaying unsteadily as he faced her. "There. That's the closest you're gonna get to an apology. Now get outta my home 'fore I do another thing I'll regret."

Susie stood there shaking, her whole body feeling alive with tension like a coiled spring. She didn't cry, didn't show any weakness, but she felt sick to her stomach and cold all over. She didn't know what she'd been expecting. Some uncharacteristic moment of forgiveness? An admission of guilt? An actual apology for all the shit he'd done to her?

But no, there it was, one last nail in the coffin. Her father regretted ever having her. She had ruined his life. And she would never be anything more than a mistake in his eyes. The bond was broken, if it had ever really been there to begin with.

Which meant she had no reason to hold back.

"Haha…hahaha…hahahaha." A dark little laugh began building in the back of her throat, a mirthless chuckle. Darkness coated her, head to claws, her body swelling, growing tall enough that she almost had to stoop to keep from knocking her head on the ceiling. Her mouth split wide as her teeth elongated. "Something you regret, huh? That's funny. **You don't even know what that word means yet."**

Her father gaped at her, wide-eyed and stunned, the look of a man watching his worst nightmare come to life in front of him. Susie had never seen that kind of fear in his eyes before. She found that she had an appetite for it.

"You're…you're not my daughter," he said, horror forcing the words past the fog in his brain and the heaviness of his tongue. He stumbled backwards, nearly tripping over the end of the couch. "What are you? WHAT ARE YOU?!"

She could still walk away. Leave and never come back. If he even remembered the incident later, he would chalk it up to a bad dream.

But she hadn't come here to take one last verbal fistful of abuse and slink away with her tail between her legs. She had come here to punish him.

**"We're the poison you always said lived inside our veins, Dad."** Susie grinned - so, so wide - at the terror on his face. **"We are Venom."**

He tried to run, then. She didn't let him.

Tendrils of solid darkness whipped out of her body like ropes, wrapping around his ankles and pulling him off his feet when he tried to drunkenly stumble away from her. He fell and hit his face on the floor, screaming and clawing for a grip on the carpet as Susie dragged him towards her.

**“You think I ruined *your* life?”** Susie bellowed. Something inside her thrilled at her unleashed fury, egging her on. **“Try growing up with you for a father! I didn’t make Mom hate you! You did that YOURSELF!”**

Her father screamed as she slammed him against the wall with a flick of her tentacle, shaking the whole apartment. Another flick in the opposite direction and he went flying into the TV, smashing the screen to bits with a shower of sparks.

He tried to crawl away on his belly, like the coward he was, but Susie picked him up with one enormous hand around the back of his head and threw him at the couch, hard enough to knock the whole thing onto its back with a crash.

*I have to do this,* she told herself. *Break the bond. He deserves it.*

She advanced on him, kicking aside the coffee table like it weighed nothing. Tendrils stabbed deep into the overturned couch and pulled, ripping it in two and sending stuffing flying everywhere like blood and viscera.

Her dad had backed into the corner, holding up his hand fearfully as though trying to ward off a demon. “Susan, st-stop! Please!”

**“You never stopped,”** she said, every word dripping with rage. **“No matter what I did. I never wanted to fight you. You could have just left me alone!”**

She grabbed him by the collar and pulled him up, slamming him against the wall. His eyes were wide and terrified. He smelled like beer and piss. She hated him so, so much.

A tongue uncurled from between her teeth, long and thick and heavy. It didn’t feel like her tongue, reacting on its own as it licked the side of her father’s face like a predatory animal tasting its prey’s fear.

“Susie…” he said, the words mushy in his mouth. “I’m sh-sorry…”

Susie drew her fist back. She wanted to smash his head through the wall. She wanted to kill him. She wanted…

***Do it, Susie. Free yourself from him.***

No. Horror crept in around the edges of the hatred, a sudden sobriety. No, this wasn’t her. She didn’t want to hurt him. She had never wanted that. She’d wanted so much better than she’d gotten, but she’d never been tempted to stoop to his level before.

Susie looked over her bulky black shoulder at the ruined couch, the cracked coffee table and smashed-up old TV that was now burning on the inside. This place had been her home once, meager and sad as it was. Now it looked like what it had always been: a shattered graveyard for a broken family.

But she wouldn’t leave a body here to rot in it.

She turned back to look at her father, opening her toothy mouth to let her hot breath blow in his face as she roared, one last venting of a lifetime of rage.

Then she dropped him and ran for the door, smashing her way through the too-small frame.

Outside she heard the wailing of sirens coming from down the street. Huh. Someone had finally called the cops.

Susie didn't wait for them to catch her. The police had never helped her before, and she wasn't about to let them arrest her again.

Maybe she shouldn't have spared him. He would tell them she had attacked him. She wouldn't be able to go back to the church. She would have to run and run and keep running.

He was supposed to take care of her, and instead he kept hurting her, again and again, in so many ways. He hadn't deserved her mercy. But damn it, she didn't want to hurt people. She wanted to be -

*What?* a voice in her head questioned. *A hero? Like Noelle's supposed to be?*

Susie wasn't a hero. She was deluding herself if she thought she could be. Heroes didn't beat up their fathers. Heroes didn't have to hold themselves back from killing people.

Maybe there were no heroes; there certainly never had been for her. Maybe there were only people fooling themselves, or fooling the rest of the world.

And maybe, if that was the case, Susie should prove it. Tear the heroes down from their pedestals, expose them for the self-centered cowards they really were. Make the whole world full of childish hero worshipers see that no one could save them except themselves.

That would be her mission. And she knew just where to start.

# Chapter 22: A Dance With Darkness

Noelle stepped into the gymnasium, Kris on her arm, feeling strangely numb. The gym had been transformed into a ballroom: a canopy of string lights were hung from end to end overhead, the bleachers had been roped off with streamers of red, pink and white balloons, and the room was lit with blue and purple lights that cast moving patterns of light across the shiny polished floor. The familiar tunes of pop-music romantic ballads, slightly muffled by Noelle's still-recovering hearing, provided accompaniment to the crowds of dancing teenagers.

None of it felt quite real to her.

The scene had a dreamlike sensation to it, like she was watching someone else's life. Some high school girl without a care in the world, who hadn't ever swung past skyscrapers hundreds of feet above the ground, or fought for her life against supervillains. Someone who hadn't nearly killed herself fighting a battle for her SOUL against an alien entity the night before.

Someone whose sister wasn't sitting in a prison cell right now.

It had been too late to intervene by the time she'd gotten home. They'd already taken Dess away. While she'd been visiting Kris in the hospital, Dess had been getting arrested. She'd only learned the news from her mother when she got back. Carol had been *furious,* but her hands were tied by the law. No one had forced Dess to violate her house arrest; there was nothing they could do to bail her out now. At least she was okay physically. Their mom had said Dess wasn't injured, which meant Ceroba had kept her word and healed her. So at least Noelle hadn't killed her sister. At least there was that.

The thoughts gnawed at her, making it difficult to focus on anything else. She felt like a failure, like she should have been able to do something to prevent what happened. She'd had one job, one responsibility above all else: protect the people she loved. And she couldn't even do that right.

And yet, life went on, and here she was: Exhausted, underslept, anxious, and wearing an expensive red dress that she'd fished out of the back of her closet. She felt strangely naked in it; this was the first time in many days that she'd gone out without wearing her costume under her clothes. Kris had even convinced her to leave her web-shooters in her locker, to remind herself that she'd be fine without them for one night.

For their own part, Kris was wearing a tux. It even fit them pretty well, despite their short stature. Noelle had no idea where they'd gotten it; she'd never seen them dress up like that before. They'd painted their nails blue, and put on winged eyeliner that vaguely resembled the curve of their Spider-Human mask's eyes.

Kris had told her, after hearing the news about Dess, that it was okay if she didn't want to go to the dance. And it was true that her heart wasn't in it. It felt weird

and wrong to be having fun at a time like this. She hadn't earned a night of celebration.

But Kris had. They were returning to school a survivor, beloved by their peers, with no terrible mistakes and violent deeds to blemish their heroic reputation. As surreal as it felt to be here, it would have been wrong for Noelle to deny them this night after everything they'd been through. They deserved a dance.

"You okay?" Kris said, leaning in and looking up at her. The scars on their face were still visible, though fainter than they'd been at first, ghostly pale streaks on their skin.

"Yeah!" Noelle replied, a little too quickly to sound convincing. "I'm just tired."

"If you decide you want to bail at any point, let me know. We don't have to stay if you're not having fun."

"It's fine, Kris," Noelle reassured them. "I just have a lot on my mind, that's all."

"I know." Kris squeezed her hand. "I'm worried about Dess too, but I don't think she'd want us to be. If anyone can survive prison, it's her. She's the second-toughest girl I know."

Noelle smiled thinly. "Only the second?"

"You'll always be top of the toughness rankings in my book." Kris perked up, looking at something behind Noelle, and pointed towards the refreshments table at the far end of the room, by the wall under the basketball hoop. "Oh hey, check it out. Berdly and Martlet are here."

Noelle followed their gaze to see the bluebirds filling up plastic cups at the punch bowl. Martlet was absolutely slaying in a sparkly blue dress, while Berdly was wearing dress pants, a neatly pressed white shirt and a blue tie. Berdly was gesturing animatedly; Noelle couldn't hear what he was saying from this distance, but Martlet must have found it funny, because she laughed and pecked a kiss on Berdly's cheek. They did indeed appear to be an item now. Well, good for them.

Noelle's initial delight at learning that news, however, gave way now to a rush of embarrassment. "Oh god, the last time I saw them was…" Was back in those ruins under the sewers, when she'd yelled at them for not appreciating her enough. It felt so stupid now; she couldn't believe she had acted that way. She wasn't sure if they were even still her friends after that. "What if they hate me now?"

Kris rolled their eyes. "'Course not. No one could ever hate you, Noelle."

"Kris, just because you have the patience of a saint doesn't mean -"

"Only one way to find out!" Kris said, grabbing her hand and pulling her towards their friends.

“Hey, wait, Kris!” Noelle began to protest, but then sighed and gave up. Kris was right, she couldn’t just avoid them forever. She was going to have to have this conversation eventually, so why not make amends now?

“Oh hey, Kris! Noelle!” Martlet chirped when she saw them coming. “You made it!”

“Kris!” Berdly looked excited. “Finally, my favorite superheroic comrade returns! It brings me great pleasure to see you looking hale and hearty once more!”

“Martlet, Berdly, h-hey…” Noelle said awkwardly. “It’s, um, nice to see you…”

“Spider-Doe,” Berdly said, in a significantly chillier voice. “How nice of you to come down to Earth and join us mere mortals for a night of frivolity. I must confess, I am surprised. I had thought such things beneath you.”

Noelle winced. Martlet just looked uncomfortable, but Berdly was obviously still affronted. He hadn’t taken that kind of sarcastic tone with her in a long time. It hurt, but… well, she probably deserved it.

“Berdly…” Kris said darkly, stepping forward, but Noelle held out a hand and stopped them.

“Look,” she said. “I wanted to apologize. For, um, the way I acted earlier. I was…going through a lot, and it made me do things that…that I wouldn’t normally do. I wasn’t acting like myself. I’m really sorry.”

“No offense, Noelle,” Martlet said, her tone gentle in a nervous kind of way, “but what you said down in the sewers sounded…pretty sincere.”

“I -” Noelle opened her mouth with the intention of denying it, but found that she couldn’t. She really had meant a lot of what she’d said, even if she had overreacted. “I guess the frustrations I was feeling were real. But it was still wrong of me to take it out on you when you were only trying to help. Trust me when I say I wasn’t thinking clearly. But I’m feeling better now, and I want to be a better friend. I’m *going* to do better.”

Martlet smiled sweetly, looking relieved. “Okay, Noelle. We forgive you. Right, Berdly?”

Berdly still looked skeptical, but Martlet elbowed him and he sighed and said, “I suppose even superheroes have bad days sometimes. Very well, Noelle. I shall accept your gracious apology!”

Noelle relaxed, feeling a weight being lifted off her chest. For all Berdly’s faults, she would have been genuinely sad to lose his friendship. She held out her arm, offering an olive branch in the form of a handshake. “Still superfriends?”

Berdly shook. “Still superfriends.”

“Yay!” Kris said. “Okay, now that that’s out of the way, I have been *dying* to ask you face-to-face.” They pointed from Berdly to Martlet and back. “You two.

How? When? *Why?"*

Berdly took a sip of punch and pushed his glasses up his nose. "Well you see, Kris, some of us are, shall we say, skilled in the romantic arts."

"I'm standing right here," Noelle said. "With Kris. Who is dating me."

"Yeah, Berdly," Kris said, putting an arm around Noelle. "I bagged a literal superhero. No offense, Martlet."

Martlet giggled. "Hey, I might surprise you."

"Ah, I certainly did not mean to throw any shade at your choice of feminine companions, Kris," Berdly said.

Noelle bristled slightly. "'Feminine companions?' I think the word you're looking for is girlfriend?"

"BUT," Berdly barreled forward, "the two of you only started dating after…how long have you known each other again?"

Noelle looked at Kris. "Um, pretty much since we were kids?"

"You took *since you were kids* to start dating, whereas I scored a date with an amazing girl in under a month!"

Noelle suppressed the urge to strangle Berdly, something she'd thankfully had a lot of practice doing. "Were we supposed to start dating when we were 10???"

Kris had gravitated to the snack table while they argued and was loading up on cookies. They handed one to Noelle and she vented her frustration with Berdly by chewing forcefully.

"Berdly," Kris said, "I distinctly remember you freaking out to us in the cafeteria about being too scared to ask Martlet to the dance."

Martlet made an excited cooing noise. "Ooooo, did he really? That's so cute!"

"Lies and slander! I wasn't scared, I was simply waiting until I came up with the right tactical strategy!"

"So how'd he do it, anyways?" Kris asked Martlet. "He refused to tell me."

She put a wing to her mouth and giggled. "Oh, he asked me out while having a panic attack right after we almost got eaten by Ms. Alphys."

Kris shook their head in bemusement. "I leave you crazy kids alone for a few days…"

"Wait, Martlet," Noelle said, recalling that previous conversation back in the cafeteria, what felt like a lifetime ago. "Can I ask you a personal question?"

"Well sure!"

“I could be wrong, and I don’t want to sound insensitive or anything, it’s cool that you’re dating Berdly, but like…we all thought you were a lesbian? Did I just imagine that?” It didn’t really matter, but she had kind of been excited to have another lesbian friend.

“Uh, *clearly,* Noelle, you were mistaken,” Berdly said, “as my lady would not have accepted my invitation to this romantic social event if she were only interested in the fairer sex.”

“I mean, I do *mainly* like girls,” Martlet said, “but it’s okay. I can be patient.”

“Exactly!” Berdly crowed. “...wait, what?”

Martlet patted him on the back. “Don’t worry about it.”

*“What does that mean??”* Berdly squawked, while Kris almost sent themself into a coughing fit from laughing while trying to swallow a mouthful of punch.

Noelle smiled, allowing herself to feel a little lighter. Listening to her friends joke around, feeling accepted by them again… it didn’t solve all her troubles, but it helped. It made her feel like maybe she was going to be okay after all.

The bluebirds weren’t the only ones she owed an apology to, though. “Hey,” she gently interrupted, “have either of you seen Susie around? I know you’ve been hanging out with her more, and I want to bury the hatchet with her too if I can.”

“Oh,” Martlet said. “I’m sorry, Noelle, but we haven’t seen her in a while.”

“Not since our little escapade with Alphys,” Berdly added. “But you know Susie - her attendance record is, to put it diplomatically, a bit short of spotless.”

“Were you really expecting her to show up to a Valentine’s Day dance?” Kris said.

“I guess not.” It was true, this really wasn’t Susie’s type of scene. But it would have been nice to explain to her what had happened in the church. She couldn’t begin to imagine what Susie thought of her after that.

The music changed; a slower song began to play, and the energy in the room changed with it, the single students and their friends drifting away to leave space in the center for couples slow-dancing.

Kris touched her arm. “May I borrow you for a dance?”

Noelle smiled down at them. “You may!” She nodded to Berdly and Martlet. “Excuse us for a sec.”

Kris led her to the center of the dance floor, greeting people along the way who saw them and stopped to welcome them back. Everyone seemed happy to see Kris, which made Noelle smile. It was strange to think that only a few months ago they had been the weird kid in class, always quietly hanging around but rarely spoken to.

The two of them stopped in the middle of the gym, right under the lights that cast them in swirling shades of blue and purple.

“Bisexual lighting,” Kris noted, putting their hands on her waist. Though they were shorter than she was, Noelle let them lead, resting her arms on their shoulders.

She giggled. “Not quite right, but it’ll do. It suits you. I like how the blue looks on your hair.”

“Maybe I should dye it,” Kris said, gently rocking from side to side. It was a very simple dance, more of a sway, but that felt somehow calming. Noelle was always in motion, always frantic and fast these days. It was nice to slow down and just hold her partner and listen to the music. She was vaguely aware, as she always was these days, of others’ eyes on her, watching. But she didn’t care. The world in this moment had shrunk down to just her and Kris.

“I think that would look good,” she told them. “Very Kris-like.”

The corner of Kris’s mouth quirked upwards in a smirk. “Because it’d be colorful and flamboyant?”

“No,” Noelle said. “Because it’s your color.” Kris had a red SOUL, the color of Determination - they had told her as much once, though she had obviously never seen it for herself. But red and blue were complementary colors, and what good was Determination without Integrity? That was something she had learned from Kris - like power and responsibility, complementary traits needed to be kept in a proper balance to be healthy.

Noelle suddenly stumbled, missing a step in her dance. Her eyes teared up as she realized something. A final lesson clicking into place.

“I think I know what was wrong with me,” she whispered. Kris looked at her, curious, so she continued. “It sounds silly, but…monsters have white SOULs, right? None of the colors that humans have.”

“Yeah,” Kris said. As always, bringing up the differences between humans and monsters made them tense up a little, but she squeezed their shoulders as though to say *I know and I’m sorry, but this is important.* “I always thought it was kinda weird, how we’re taught that all the human SOUL colors represent defining attributes for each person, but monsters don’t get that. They’re just told that white represents the Angel who created them.”

“Regardless of what you think it means, though, I have a white SOUL. The symbiote’s color was black, the inverse, because it came from a world of pure dark. And when it was…bonded with me, I sometimes felt like it was covering my SOUL. Making it darker.”

Kris frowned. They looked a bit confused about why she was talking about SOUL colors in the middle of their romantic moment, but they ran with it. “Sooo…what are you saying? That it was evil?”

“No, not at all. Angelism isn’t about good and evil, Kris,” Noelle explained. “There’s an Angel, but no Devil. There are virtues, but no sin. But it *does* teach that Dark is the opposite of Light. Not like a bad opposite, but like the other side of a coin, or like - I don’t know, shadows cast in the sun? You can’t have one without the other. The light naturally creates and sustains the dark.”

“So it wasn’t evil,” Kris backpedaled. “It’s just…the opposite of good?”

“It’s the shadow side of good,” Noelle said, working it out in her head even as she spoke. “It wanted to be a hero too. But it focused on the violence, the anger. Punishing the wicked instead of protecting the innocent. I thought I had somehow corrupted it with my worst impulses, but maybe… maybe that was just its nature. I still feel like I failed it, but…maybe it wasn’t entirely my fault. Maybe we just weren’t compatible.”

“Compatibility is important in a relationship,” Kris said. They took her hand in theirs, placing their other arm against her back, and dipped her down towards the ground, making her laugh in surprise. “Don’t you think?”

“Yeah,” Noelle grinned up at them. They raised her again and she resumed their dance, letting Kris lift her arm and spin her. “Because that’s the thing, isn’t it - the world *isn’t* just black and white. I believe in Angelism, but it’s a *monster* religion, and an ancient one, from before we knew as much about science and biology. It doesn’t tell the whole story. There are people like you, Kris, who have SOULs in all the colors of the rainbow. Isn’t that beautiful? I think I had forgotten that, trying to make everything and everyone fit into either Good or Bad. But if I’m going to be a true hero, then I need to remember that it doesn’t always work that way. That’s the world I want to live in, to fight for - not a world of Light and Dark, but a world of *colors.”*

She leaned down, cupping Kris’s cheek, her face close enough to theirs that she could feel the warmth of their breath. Their eyes were a deep red, like their SOUL. “Did I ever tell you that I can feel your SOUL when I kiss you?” she whispered. “Do you know what it feels like to me?”

Kris didn’t speak, but they closed their eyes and leaned into the kiss, lips parted and lightly brushing hers, and *there,* there it was again, she could feel it. Like a resonance, a vibration, passing from one SOUL to the other.

“You feel *warm.* Like standing in front of a roaring fire on a cold winter’s day,” Noelle whispered, soft enough that only they could hear. “You feel like the sun on my fur in summer. You feel like home.”

She kissed them, then, and let herself bask in their warmth.

Eventually, though, the moment passed. The kiss broke off, and Kris let Noelle take the lead in the dance, holding her close enough that she could feel their heartbeat through their clothes. If she closed her eyes, and focused only on touch and not sight, she could sense the warm red glow from inside them.

The song wound down, and the slow-dance portion of the evening’s program ended, at least for now. As the music transitioned into something livelier, and the

dancers left the floor, Kris and Noelle walked hand in hand back to their friends on the side of the room.

“Oooooh, you two looked so CUTE together!” Martlet squealed when she saw them coming.

“Thanks!” Noelle said cheerily.

Even Berdly looked touched. He put his wing on Kris’s shoulder. “Kris. Perhaps I was wrong - yes, I’m not afraid to admit it! You are no mere newb in the art of love. You may in fact be…a Journeythem Romancer! Obviously you have not yet attained *my* level of mastery, but there is hope for you yet!”

Kris smirked. “Thanks, I think.”

Others began gravitating towards them, a crowd of friends and admirers, all wanting to comment on their dance. Noelle hadn’t realized they’d been the center of attention again, but this once, it felt nice and not uncomfortable.

Jockington slithered up, dressed in a small, tube-shaped suit and bow tie, and gave her his armless version of a high-five, which was to stand on his head and slap her palm with the tip of his tail. Catti caught Noelle’s eye from where she was standing alone in the corner looking at her phone, and silently gave her a thumbs up. Temmie hopped excitedly around Noelle’s legs, babbling something about her “IRL OTP.” And Snowy and MK ran up to Kris, complimenting Kris’s cool scars and begging somewhat insensitively to hear about what getting electrocuted had felt like (Kris’s answer: “You know, guys, you can find out for yourself with one simple trick involving a fork and an electrical outlet.”).

It all felt so…normal. Her first day in a long time without Spider-Doe. Everyone was here, like nothing had changed. Nothing to remind her of everything that had transpired. Nothing, except…

She felt someone watching her, and looked around until she spotted Ms. Alphys, standing by herself along the wall. She was holding a cup of punch in one hand, the empty sleeve on the other side of her suit jacket pinned up.

Right. While she was doing the apology tour, she should probably check on her recently-restored teacher.

“Hey, Ms. Alphys,” she said, trying to ignore the way Alphys had started sweating when Noelle walked up. “Are you…doing okay?”

“I’m g-great!” Alphys said, with the most forced cheerfulness Noelle had ever heard - and she’d heard plenty coming from her own mouth over the years. “St-still got a job…chaperoning teenagers…facilitating y-young love…” She looked up at Noelle. “I saw you and K-Kris dancing earlier. It’s r-really nice to see you two happy.”

“I’m glad you’re still around, Alphys,” Noelle said. “But…listen, I’m really sorry. About what I di-”

“It’s o-okay!” Alphys stammered, hastening to interrupt. “It was my fault, N-Noelle, not yours. And you did s-save me from being…that thing. I owe you one.”

“No, you don’t owe me anything,” Noelle insisted. “I know what it’s like now. To change. To feel out of control. I just wanted to let you know that I cured myself, too.”

“C-Cured yourself? Of what?”

“Let’s just say… I’m glad we’re both feeling more like ourselves now.”

Alphys said something in reply, but Noelle didn’t hear it. She had become distracted by a faint prickle along the top of her scalp.

She raised her head, her stomach clenching with sudden anxiety as she looked past the crowd towards the entrance to the gym, trying to narrow in on the source of the warning. It was just a tingle, and she knew her spider-sense well enough by now to know that only meant the *possibility* of danger, rather than an imminent threat. But even so…

There. She had just spotted a figure standing framed in the open doors, the light from the hall outside behind them. Like they were just standing on the threshold of the dance, scanning the crowd. A familiar figure, tall with hunched shoulders, clenched fists, and a long mane of messy hair.

She tore her eyes away long enough to glance at Kris. They were still chatting with MK and Snowy, distracted enough that they weren’t keeping track of her whereabouts. She could probably slip away for a minute…

“Noelle?” Alphys asked, and she realized that she hadn’t been listening to a word of what her teacher had been saying.

She looked back at the doors just in time to see a shadow disappearing down the hall outside.

“Sorry, excuse me for a moment…”

She walked away, skirting the edge of the dance floor, pushing her way through crowds of laughing, chatting students with repeated “excuse me”s and “coming through, sorry”s. It took her a bit to wind her way through the crowded gym.

When she got to the doors and rushed out into the hall, she turned to see Susie standing a ways down the hall, by the bend, as though waiting for her. Except as soon as she saw Noelle, she turned and disappeared around the corner again.

“Wait!” Noelle called, her hooves clicking against the floor as she ran after Susie. “I just want to talk to you!”

Noelle rounded the corner to find Susie standing there, head down, hair over her eyes like the way Kris usually wore theirs. Something seemed…different about her.

She got an eerie feeling from this, though it could just be the empty hallway, abandoned with everyone else in the gym and all the classrooms locked up for the night. Noelle wasn't used to seeing the school this empty. Just her and Susie and the muffled music from down the hall.

She took a few cautious steps forward. "Susie? Are you…okay?"

"Heh," Susie grinned, flashing sharp yellowed teeth. "Never better."

"That's, um, that's good!" Noelle said awkwardly, taking another step closer. She always felt so awkward around Susie, always putting her foot in her mouth, never knowing the right thing to say. "Hey, uh, about last night…"

"Last night when you attacked me?" Susie said. "When you smashed up the church and *ran away* like a *coward?"*

Noelle held up her hands placatingly, disturbed by the sudden venom in Susie's voice. "Look, you don't know the whole story."

"I think I know enough," Susie said. She took a step towards Noelle, and Noelle instinctively stepped back, feeling intimidated despite having proven time and time again that Susie was outmatched in a fight with her. "I know you're unstable. I know you pretend to be a hero even as you go around beating people up. I know you only care about the attention, and when people realize that, they'll turn on you, just like you use and betray everyone who trusts you."

"Wh-what?" Noelle stammered. "Susie, where is this coming from? I know I haven't always been the best hero, but I haven't *betrayed* you."

"Is that so?" Susie snarled, clenching her fists. She took another step closer to Noelle, getting right up in her face now, but Noelle stood her ground this time. She wasn't going to flinch away from Susie's hostility. Susie had always had it out for her, since even before she got her powers. That didn't mean she had to just stand there and take the abuse.

"Why do you hate me so much, anyways? I know I've treated you badly, Susie, but I followed you out here to *apologize.* I'm trying to do better, if you'll just give me a chance!"

"You can keep your apology," Susie said. "I don't need it. In fact, you know what? Let me tell you a secret, Holiday."

Her hand lashed out faster than Noelle had ever seen her move before, her claws seizing Noelle around the neck. With a roar, Susie charged, knocking Noelle off her hooves, and slammed her against the lockers lining the wall. She gasped, eyes wide, as Susie lifted her entire weight with one arm, her hand squeezing Noelle's throat.

She squirmed and struggled, trying to pry Susie's fingers off her windpipe. How was Susie so *strong?* Why hadn't her spider-sense warned her? Even now, she felt barely even a prickle. "Hurrrk! Su-Susie…"

Susie's hair had fallen out of her face when she rushed Noelle, her bangs swept to the side, exposing her eyes. They were entirely black. **"People like you piss us off."**

"Oh my god. It's…y...you…"

**"You think you can ruin our life and make it all okay with an APOLOGY?"** The symbiote began covering Susie's body, and unlike when Noelle had worn it, it made her bigger, bulking her up like a bodybuilder on steroids. Her muscles swelled, her arms grew thick and strong, and the hand around Noelle's neck grew in size so much that her chin was forced up. **"You think you can just sweep everything you've done under the rug? Violent one day and friendly the next? Well, we're not going to take that crap anymore!"**

"Susie - ackk! - *listen to me!"*

**"No. No more talking. You had your chance. It's time you learned what it's like to lose for a change. To lose *everything.* Figure if I'm cutting ties then I might as well go out causing some *real* carnage, right? You like wearing masks, Spider-Doe, so tell us…"** The symbiote closed over Susie's face like a mouth snapping shut, revealing a new face, one with impossibly long teeth and bright, jagged white splotches for eyes. Noelle stared up in terror as a slimy pink tongue unfurled from Susie's mouth, licking the fur on Noelle's cheek. **"How do you feel about losing your face?"**

Noelle gave a choked-off scream and tucked her legs up under her, bracing her back against the lockers and kicking as hard as she could, slamming her hooves into Susie's stomach. Susie grunted, and with a swing of her arm she threw Noelle away down the hall.

Noelle hit the floor and rolled, bouncing along the smooth surface, her legs getting tangled in her dress. She finally came to a halt, bruised and disoriented, looking up at the fluorescent lights in the ceiling in a stunned daze while she coughed and tried to catch her breath. Angel have mercy, she wasn't ready for this. She had never stopped to think that the symbiote might have survived, that it might come back for her. How could she have been stupid enough to assume that it was gone?

**"Come on, Noelle. You can do better than this - we *know* you can. Or are you really nothing without this power?"**

Noelle staggered to her hooves, facing down Susie, whose hulking form dominated the hallway, tall enough that her head almost brushed the ceiling. "You keep saying 'we,'" Noelle pointed out, her voice hoarse from being strangled. "Susie, do you even know what that thing you're wearing is? Do you know what it's doing to you?"

**"I know it's making me stronger,"** Susie said. **"I know you didn't want anyone else to have this kind of power. Well guess what? You don't get to hog it all to yourself anymore."**

“Listen to me, Susie,” Noelle pleaded. “It’s not what you think. It’s controlling y-”

She cut off as a tentacle whipped out from the main mass of Susie’s body. Noelle just barely dodged in time to avoid it striking her - once again her spider-sense had failed to warn her. Something about the symbiote, the bond it once had with her, was creating a blind spot in her senses, like they thought it was still part of her and not an external threat.

**“I said enough talking! You want to be a hero so bad, Spider-Doe? Then prove it!”**

“I don’t want to fight you, Susie!”

Susie put her head down and bull-rushed Noelle, tongue flapping from her open mouth, her symbiote-coated mane of hair trailing in the air behind her like a stroke of black paint. **“Too bad!”**

Noelle threw herself into a slide as Susie drew near, letting her momentum propel her as she slid on her back between Susie’s legs. One thing she had learned from fighting with Susie in the past is that being small and agile could give her an edge even in fights with bigger, heavier opponents, and Susie’s symbiote-enhanced body was bulkier and clumsier than ever. Susie had the brute strength advantage, but Noelle knew how to *move.*

She hopped up from sliding along the smooth floor on her dress and fluidly used her momentum to transition into a sprint, taking off down the hall. She had to lead Susie away from the gym, take this fight outside if she could so that no one else would be endangered.

**“Running away?”** Susie bellowed from behind her, heavy footfalls echoing down the hall as she gave chase. **“I knew you were a coward!”**

Just as she was about to round the corner Noelle sensed - not with her powers, but plain old instinct - the tentacle about to grab her like a living rope. She leapt nimbly up and to the side and stuck to the wall just above the lockers, resuming her sprint but at a 90-degree angle parallel to the floor. She glanced over her shoulder to see Susie barreling down the hall after her.

Noelle put on speed, straining her super-powered muscles to keep up the momentum needed to run along the wall without falling - harder to do in this stupid dress. Figures this would happen the *one* day she didn’t wear her costume!

She heard a sound like rending metal from behind her and looked back to see the symbiote’s tentacles ripping off half a dozen locker doors at once. It threw one at her like a frisbee and she yelped, jumping back down to the floor as the spinning metal rectangle bounced off the wall where she’d just been standing.

Noelle looked back to see Susie hurl another locker door at her. She quickly raised her arm and pressed her fingers to her palm, intending to catch the projectile with her webbing and throw it back. A second too late, she remembered that, for once, she wasn’t wearing her web-shooters.

Noelle bent her knees and jerked her head backwards in a panic. The locker door passed right over her nose, missing her by barely half an inch.

"Okay, that is *it!"* she shouted, glaring at Susie. "You almost took my head off! This has to stop, Susie, right now!"

**"Aw, what's the matter?"** Susie taunted, throwing another sheet of steel, which Noelle dodged. **"You can dish it out but you can't take it, huh?"**

"Susie, please! You may not realize it but the suit is alive! It's influencing you, making you do this!"

**"Bullshit! No one's making me do anything! Not anymore!"**

"I'm not lying!" Noelle pleaded. "You have to resist it! Fight back!"

Susie reached her arm out and beckoned with a *come at me* curl of her clawed fingers. **"You first."**

Noelle glanced over her shoulder; they had circled around the hall to the back end of the gym; she could hear the muffled sounds of romantic pop music from the other side of the cinderbrick wall, a bizarre juxtaposition with the scene out here. Just on the other side of that wall, all her friends and classmates were dancing and laughing, having the fun night that she had felt guilty for enjoying, while she held off a rampaging monster just out of sight.

Noelle didn't want to fight Susie, but she could. Even in a dress, with no web-shooters, she could fight a power that used to be her own. The symbiote was after her because of *her* mistakes, not just Susie's misplaced anger. She wouldn't run from her own darkness anymore.

"All right, fine," she said, squaring her shoulders and clenching her fists. "You want to dance? *Let's dance."*

The Susie-symbiote grinned, mouth splitting open in grotesque delight. It sprinted down the hall and sprang at her like a predator pouncing, and Noelle leapt into the air to meet it, fist pulled back behind her head, screaming a wordless shout of defiance.

****

Kris was enjoying the party. After their near-death experience and the long days spent cooped up in a hospital bed, it felt great to be around other people again. Dancing with Noelle, wowing MK and Snowy with stories of their adventures, cracking jokes with Jockington, joining Martlet in gently ribbing Berdly…all of it reminded them that they had friends, a place they belonged. They had gained much of their current popularity from being Spider-Human, that much was true: But they *maintained* it by being Kris.

People genuinely liked being around them and wanted to be their friend for that reason. They had to remember that. They had more going for them than just superheroics and celebrity.

Those things still attracted a lot of attention, of course, which still got pretty tiring. They'd had a swarm of admirers wanting to talk to them after their dance with Noelle, and it had taken a little while to extricate themself from the crowd. Currently they were standing at the snack table by the wall on the far end of the room, getting a refill from the punch bowl while listening (well, half-listening) to Berdly explaining in-depth to Martlet why *Space Fights Episode 8* was, contrary to popular opinion, actually a superior film to *Space Fights Episode 7.* Incredibly, she was equally enthusiastic about the subject. Kris was starting to see why the two were a good match.

They were also starting to wonder where their own girlfriend had gotten to. They'd seen Noelle talking to Alphys a short while ago, but had since lost track of her in the crowd. It was fine if Noelle wanted to mingle on her own a bit - they didn't have to be handcuffed to each other all night or anything - but Kris wouldn't have minded an excuse to slip away right now. Oh well, if she wanted to find them she could just follow the sound of Berdly's voice, which was surely audible even over the crowd and the music and -

And the distant booming noises?

Kris's spider-sense broke out in a wave of tingly sensation, and it was like Berdly's voice and all the other sounds in the room faded away, like Kris had just put on noise-cancelling headphones. They turned, a sudden sinking feeling in their gut, towards the wall.

Just in time for a huge, dark shape to crash through it in an explosion of concrete cinder blocks.

"Get down!" Kris shouted, throwing themself at Berdly and Martlet and dragging their friends to the ground. Kris shielded them with their body as the table was overturned, spraying food and paper cups everywhere along with the dust and chunks of wall. The punch bowl tipped over right onto their back, drenching them in sticky red liquid and staining their suit jacket.

Kris stood up, squinting through the dust to make out what was happening as people screamed  and backed away from the figures who had just burst through the wall and were now tumbling to a halt on the gym floor, grappling with each other. One was Noelle, her dress torn at the abdomen and sides and coated with plaster dust, her perfectly styled golden hair mussed. The other, much larger figure she was exchanging blows with looked like a Hulk monster made out of an oil spill. Though the shape of its head, the long mane of hair, looked familiar…

Oh no. It *couldn't be.*

"Noelle!" Kris shouted, pulling Berdly and Martlet to their feet. "Need some help?"

Noelle flipped upside down in the air, delivered a kick to the jaw of the figure she was fighting, and landed in a crouch. “Kris! Get everyone to safety! I’ll hold them off!”

“But -”

“Just trust me! It’s me they’re after!”

*They.* Somehow, Kris didn’t think she meant that in the fun nonbinary way, which confirmed that Noelle’s foe was in fact what it looked like. Holy shit this was bad.

But they had to trust her, like she told them to. They had learned long ago that the number one priority in a supervillain fight should always be getting the bystanders to safety.

“Come on!” they told the bluebirds, while Susie roared in fury and slashed at Noelle with her claws; the smaller and more agile doe was dodging her strikes, but she couldn’t keep that up forever. “Help me get these people moving!”

The crowd was hanging back, and while Kris could hear their mother and Ms. Alphys shouting for people to run, many of the kids closest to the fighting had produced cell phones and begun filming the battle. Not the right instinct at a time like this.

Kris jumped right in front of them and pointed to the doors at the other end of the room. “Everyone follow me! NOW!”

They leapt over the heads of the crowd and attached a webline to the ceiling, swinging across the room and landing on the wall above the doors. “This way! Stay calm, don’t push, but keep it moving, fast as you can!” Martlet and Berdly followed their lead, flying over the crowd and shouting instructions and encouragement, ensuring they didn’t panic and start trampling each other.

Kris didn’t wait to see if they all followed. They had to get back into the fight; no matter what Noelle said, they weren’t going to leave her to fend for herself this time. But first, they needed to fetch something.

They swung out the door and took off running down the hallway, pushing their enhanced but still healing body to move faster. They hadn’t done any strenuous exercise since getting out of the hospital, not even any webslinging, and their stamina was lagging behind their usual, making them tire more easily.

But still they ran, diverging from the crowd of fleeing students, away from the exits and towards their locker. On the way they shrugged off their suit jacket and kicked off their shoes.

They skidded to a halt in front of their locker, rushing to input the combination. Inside was a costume, an old spare that they’d hidden there in case of just such an emergency. There was no time for modesty, and no one around anyways, so they quickly hopped out of their pants and tore off their dress shirt, ripping the buttons free in their haste. They dug out their hidden costume and pulled it on as quickly

as possible; it was a good thing they'd had plenty of experience with quick clothing changes.

The costume also included a mask, white eyes staring up from the blue fabric. Kris hesitated for a single, brief moment as they held it, looking down at the face they had created all those years ago - not just to hide their identity, but to fragment it, to bend themself into a shape that they could live with. A figure who could be free of all their internalized shame and insecurity, who wouldn't hate what they saw reflected in the windows of the buildings they swung past. Who could take a word that invoked such conflict inside them and make it mean something *good* - even if, eventually, it had also turned that word into a brand that they could never get away from.

Spider-Human: their greatest pride, and biggest mistake.

They were pulled out of the uncomfortable moment of self-reflection by a flash of blue in their peripheral vision. They looked up to see Martlet flying down the hall, panting as she flapped her wings.

"Martlet!" Kris called as she passed overhead. "Where are you going? The exit is the other way!"

"I'm not leaving!" she called back before disappearing around the corner. "Just getting something from my locker! It'll help!"

Something from her locker? Kris had no idea what that could be, but it reminded them of their mission. They tossed the mask back in their locker and slammed the door shut. They didn't need it - this threat had come to them in their own school, and they would fight it wearing their own face.

Noelle's locker was just down the hall from theirs. They grabbed the padlock… and remembered that they didn't know the combination. They did, however, know Noelle.

Kris put in the first four-digit code that came to mind, and sure enough, it unlocked. They opened the door and grabbed Noelle's web-shooters from inside.

Then they turned and ran back the way they'd come, towards the gym, praying that they wouldn't be too late.

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Noelle gasped, the wind knocked out of her as Susie slammed her against the floor. This fight wasn't going well. Susie seemed able to shrug off every blow she landed; the sheer bulk of padding from all that symbiote matter made it near-impossible to actually hurt her. But it also meant that she hit like a tank and was too heavy to knock over easily.

Noelle tried to grab her attacker's hand and force her off, but the symbiote pinned her down, its hand morphing into a mass of vine-like tentacles, crushing her chest and pinning one arm against her side. With her other arm she frantically waved away the handful of classmates who were still watching the fight: Jockington, Snowy, MK and Berdly. "What are you waiting for? Run!"

**"Embarrassed to be seen getting your ass kicked?"** Susie rumbled. She held Noelle up in the air, thick tentacle vines crushing the breath out of her even as she kicked and struggled to break free. **"Take a good long look, everyone! Your so-called hero can't protect you! She's nothing but a fraud! We're the one you should respect. Forget Spider-Doe - the future belongs to Venom now!"**

"Says the b-bully!" a scratchy, unexpected voice shouted, and Noelle looked over to see Alphys running up to shield the others. "This is u-unacceptable student behavior, S-Susie! You're going to be in a lot of t-trouble if you don't stop right now!"

"Alphys, don't worry about me!" Noelle gasped out. "Get the others out of here!"

But Alphys had broken the dam, and now her friends were emboldened to make a stand. Jockington, Snowy and MK flanked Alphys. "If you want, Noelle," Jockington said bravely, "You're going to have to go, through us, dude."

"Guys, get out of here!" Noelle insisted. "I'm the one she wants!"

"We're your friends, Noelle," Snowy said, clicking his beak in an excited chitter. "What good are friends if they don't *snow* up for you? Hahaha…ha…" No one laughed, and he trailed off lamely. "N-not the time, huh…"

Berdly ran up in front of all of them, blocking Susie's path. "Susie!" he twittered. "What happened to you? Why are you doing this?"

**"Berdly,"** Susie said. **"You and Martlet were actually nice to Susie - or at least you pretended to care. So we're going to give you one chance to stay the hell out of our way."**

"This is insane!" Berdly objected. "You don't have to engage in such destructive theatrics! Just put Noelle down so we can have a calm, rational discussion."

**"You can't trick us,"** Susie snarled. **"You were willing to hang out with her when Kris and Noelle weren't around, but the moment your precious spiders return, you forget all about her. You were never really her friend, were you? Susie should have known you would choose them over her."**

"That's not true!" Berdly pleaded. "If you're upset, we can talk about it! Just don't hurt Noelle!"

**"You want her back that bad?"** Susie said. **"Then go and get her!"**

Noelle's friends gasped and screamed as Susie wound her arm back and threw her away, the force of the throw sending her flying high into the air across the gymnasium. She panicked, the room spinning in a disorienting blur, and reached

out to fire a web to halt her momentum, only to be stopped short once more by the realization that she couldn't.

No webs.

High velocity.

She didn't have to be a science major to know how this ended. The wall rushed up to meet her, and Noelle squeezed her eyes shut and prayed.

Something slammed into her body, but it didn't hurt, and it wasn't a solid brick wall. It was a body with an arm around her, holding her close as they plucked her from midair and swung her to the top of the bleacher stands.

"Kris!" Noelle gasped, clutching to them to steady herself as they landed. "You saved me!"

"What are heroes for?" Kris said with a smile. They were finally dressed in their dashing blue bodysuit again, and they held out a pair of web-shooters in their hand. "I broke into your locker and grabbed these for you. Thought you might need them. By the way, '1225' isn't a very secure combo. Guessed it on my first try."

"Kris, you have super-strength!" Noelle said as she strapped the wristbands on. "You could have just ripped the door off if you had to!"

"Oh yeah. Well, I still think you should change it."

"How about we fight now and critique my passcodes later?" Noelle looked down at the gym floor. Alphys was leading the others in harassing Susie, running circles around her and darting in and out, keeping her distracted. They couldn't really do anything to her - not least of which because half of them had 1 or fewer arms - but they were managing to hold her attention for the moment. "We need to get down there before someone gets hurt!"

"Wait!" Kris grabbed her arm. "What we need is a plan. You know this thing better than I do. How are we supposed to fight it?"

"I don't know, Kris." Noelle looked at them, and her eyes were scared but determined. "I don't know how to stop it. It's stronger than ever, and Susie… Susie's really hurting."

"Hurting *how?* What did you ever do to her?"

Noelle looked down at Susie, who roared in annoyance, writhing tentacles bursting from her body. Alphys and the students scattered, scrambling backwards as those tentacles thrashed blindly through the air around her. "I think I let her down. Both of them. Which means I have to make it right."

She didn't stop to explain any further; there was no time. Instead she leapt forward off the bleachers and swung down to the gym floor, Kris landing in a crouch beside her. Their friends gathered behind them, looking unsure whether they should stay and help or run for cover and leave it to the heroes.

“Susie!” Kris yelled. “It’s not too late to stop this!”

The symbiote’s mouth split open on the sides like layers peeling back, and the black substance of its “face” melted away, webbing and all.

**“Called in the spider-freak cavalry, did you?”** Susie said. Her eyes were still completely black and her voice sounded different, like there was a second voice layered on top of it - a voice Noelle recognized, only darker, angrier. **“Nice suit, Kris. Ours is cooler.”**

“Susie,” Kris said, “what the hell do you think you’re doing?”

**“Proving a point. All we wanted was a fair fight, but if Noelle’s allowed to get her friends to defend her, then so are we!”**

Without warning, Susie slammed her claws into her chest, clenched her fists, and then flung her arms out wide, spraying chunks of symbiote matter into the air. Noelle and Kris ducked, but she hadn’t been aiming for them. Instead, the balls of goo landed among their friends.

Noelle watched in horror as the symbiote matter that struck them spread, enveloping them in inky dark slime as they fell to the floor, thrashing and struggling. Within seconds, Berdly, Alphys, Snowy, MK and even Jockington were all covered head to toe.

Then their struggles abruptly stopped. They got to their feet, moving slowly but deliberately, and stood there. All in a line, facing Kris and Noelle. All with jagged white eye splashes and mouths filled with sharp teeth and long tongues.

“Um, guys?” Kris said nervously. “Really not loving the new look here.” They glanced at Noelle. “Were you able to do this to people when you were wearing that thing?”

“I…don’t think so? But I’ve seen it done before.” She thought back to Gastcorp and the dark void where this all began, filled with scientists and staff turned into goop-covered drones. “Try not to hurt them, Kris. They can’t control themselves.”

Kris nodded, and the two superheroes assumed a back-to-back stance, Kris facing the symbiote students and Noelle facing Susie - or Venom, as the two of them had called themself.

Venom grinned, green drool dripping from their toothy, face-splitting smile. **“Now it’s a party.”**

Noelle braced herself, feeling Kris’s back against hers - and she found that she wasn’t afraid. Because for once, she had what she’d been wanting all these weeks: Someone solid and reliable at her back, who she could count on. Not an alien creature she barely understood, but someone she loved.

She didn’t want to hurt Susie, any more than she had wanted to betray the symbiote. She hadn’t wanted any of this. But she was never, *ever* going to let

anyone hurt Kris again. Noelle had a responsibility to keep people safe, and so she promised herself that she would do whatever it took.

No matter what the cost.

# Chapter 23: Symbiosis

The symbiote raged.

At first, Susie had mistaken that rage for her own. And maybe some of it, at first, had been. But like pouring fuel on a fire, the flames were spreading beyond her control now, and she was forced to confront a terrifying truth: These emotions weren't all hers. These vicious thoughts she was having didn't all come from her own brain. There was another mind in here with her. A much louder one.

And she didn't know how to make it shut up.

"Stop it! I don't want to hurt them!" she shouted, but buried inside the black costume, her voice was muffled. She wasn't the one speaking anymore, and her face was not the face the others saw.

The costume, or whatever it was, ignored her. Worse, it *overrode* her. It slashed its claws at Spider-Doe, and Susie had no choice but to swipe her arm. It lashed out with its tentacles when Susie hadn't told it to do so. It spoke for her, with a voice that wasn't hers, saying hurtful, angry words.

All Susie had wanted was to take Noelle down a peg, teach her a lesson. She had thought that Noelle was crazy, that she needed someone to stop her so she could get help. That's what she had told herself: That it would be for Noelle's own good if someone knocked some sense into her. But now she was thinking that if Noelle *had* been crazy, it was this thing she was wearing that was to blame.

She didn't really hate Noelle - but the symbiote did. And while Susie had been reveling in feeling strong, in being powerful enough that nobody could push her around anymore, the symbiote had snuck in and taken control. At some point in the fight, it had stopped being Susie doing those things.

But that didn't make her feel any less guilty for them, as her dream of power and agency was corrupted into a nightmare.

Susie screamed into the suffocating darkness, but it didn't listen, and it didn't stop. No one ever did.

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Nothing was working. Noelle's strongest punches and kicks barely seemed to faze Susie, so instead she'd tried using her webbing, wrapping Susie's legs together. That slowed her down a little, but only until the symbiote's tentacles ripped the webbing apart like it was made of tissue paper. Then Noelle was right back to playing defense.

She ducked under a punch that had enough force to take her head off, dove behind Susie, and spun around, webbing up both Susie's arms and straining to hold her back.

**"That's not going to work, Noelle,"** the symbiote's voice said. **"You can't restrain us anymore."**

Susie flung her arms over her head and pulled Noelle off the ground by the webbing strands connecting them, sending her flipping head over hooves in the air. This time she had her web-shooters though, and was able to catch herself, attaching a webline to the ceiling and turning her fall into a swing, her momentum propelling her back around in an arc across the gym. At least she had more space to maneuver now with her webs.

From up high, she could see Kris struggling to manage the crowd of symbiote-controlled classmates. She wasn't sure how Susie was controlling them exactly, but they all seemed singularly driven to attack Kris. Kris had webbed Alphys and Snowy to the floor, and was grappling with Jockington, who wiggled furiously in Kris's arms, trying to bite their face with a terrifying snake's mouth full of fangs.

Noelle swung down, shooting a glob of webbing paste directly into Susie's face to blind her and buy them a few seconds. She landed next to Kris, grabbed Jockington by the tail, and threw the snake far away up into the bleachers. Hopefully that wouldn't hurt him, if the symbiote absorbed the impact.

"Thanks!" Kris panted. "These guys just keep coming!"

"This isn't getting us anywhere!" Noelle said. MK leapt at her, sprouting symbiote tentacle arms from the sides of their normally armless body. She kicked them aside, then webbed them to the floor. But even as she poured on her webs, Alphys and Snowy were ripping free from Kris's and single-mindedly throwing themselves back into the fray.

"We all know you're the smart one!" Kris said. "Got any genius ideas?"

"The only thing that I know for sure works is loud sounds," Noelle said. But there were no church bells in the high school gymnasium, she didn't have access to the controls for the sound system, and the only other source of loud noise she could think of was…

Wait. She had an idea.

"The fire alarm!" she shouted, pointing at the little red box on the wall by the doors. "Maybe if we set it off, the noise will weaken the symbiote!"

"On it!" Kris said, raising their arm to shoot a webline and swing over there. But before they could, Alphys and Snowy tackled them, and Kris fell to the ground, struggling to throw off their attackers. Noelle rushed to help them, but something grabbed her from behind, dragging her backwards.

It was Berdly. He opened a beak full of little razor-sharp teeth and screeched into her ear, a bloated pink tongue wiggling in the air like a worm.

“Oh *god.”* Noelle flinched away, at least as far as she could with goopy black wings wrapped around her. “Berdly, if we get out of this I’m never going to complain about all your chatter again. But right now I really need you to shut up!”

She tried to struggle and throw him off, but it was surprisingly difficult, his symbiote-enhanced strength proving an equal match for hers. She looked to Kris for help, but they were in the same boat. MK had ripped free of her webs and joined the group dogpiling on top of Kris, and she spotted Jockington slithering back over, forked symbiote tongue hissing. He threw himself at her, wrapping around her waist and squeezing her while Berdly held her arms behind her back.

The tide was turning against them. They were losing this fight.

And then a shadow fell over Noelle, and she looked up to see Venom looming over them. **“Finally ready to stop fighting?”**

“What do you want?” Noelle said, grunting as she strained to break free. “Is Susie even still in there or is it you pulling the strings now? Do you want to bond with me again, is that it?”

**“We thought we did,”** Venom admitted. They held up their arm, twisting their hand around to admire their long claws. **“But after seeing what this host can do…after feeling the power of her anger…we’ve realized something. We don’t need you anymore, Noelle.”** They leaned down to stare Noelle in the eyes, teeth glistening like a threat. **“Now we just want to see you hurt, like we were hurt.”**

“Over my dead body!” Kris spat furiously.

Venom turned to look at them; they were pinned down to the ground on their stomach, hair falling into their eyes as they struggled, unable to sit up with the symbiote drones pulling their hands behind their back.

**“Hmm,”** Venom hummed, taking a heavy step towards Kris. **“Maybe we will give you your wish.”**

“No!” Noelle shouted, straining harder. “Leave them alone! This is between you and me!”

**“Is it?”** Venom said. **“Someone we trusted - someone we *loved* - tried to kill us. Why shouldn’t we hurt someone you love in return?”**

“Be-because Susie doesn’t want that!” Noelle said, fear throbbing inside her like a terrified drumbeat. “I know she would never go this far. And if you force her to do this out of revenge, you’ll alienate her just as much as you did me. You’ll never have a host who accepts you if you use them to hurt people!”

**“You’re right,”** Venom said. **“She’s screaming at us right now. She wants us to stop.”** They paused, just for a moment, before adding, **“But we don’t have to listen.”**

The venomized classmates holding Kris down released them and stepped back, but Kris barely had time to begin getting up before Venom's hand slammed them back down against the floor. The symbiote-swollen claw was big enough to wrap around their entire torso, pinning their arms to their sides as Venom lifted them off the ground, crushing them tight enough that their breath came out in a choked gasp.

Kris caught her eyes, looking terrified. "N-Noelle."

**"Noelle thought a lot about how you don't like being a human,"** Venom rumbled, holding Kris up to look them in the eye. **"You don't like looking different. Hey, Kris. How would you feel…"** That horrible mouth split into a grin of sharp pointed teeth again, big enough to swallow Kris's head whole. **"About losing your face?"**

"No!" Noelle screamed, thrashing against the symbiotes holding her back. "Hurt me instead! I'll do anything you want! PLEASE DON'T DO TH-"

A streak of blue and yellow sped through the air, slamming into Venom with a burst of flapping wings and scratching talons. "Leave my friends ALONE!"

"Martlet!" Noelle squealed in surprise. She was wearing some kind of flight suit - in a sudden flash of memory, Noelle remembered that she'd been wearing the same thing that day in the ruins underground. "Angel, it's good to see you! I thought you evacuated with the others!"

"I couldn't just leave you!" Martlet chirped, flying circles around Venom's head. "You two needed help!"

**"Martlet,"** Venom growled. They tossed Kris aside in order to swipe their arms at her, trying to claw her out of the sky, but she was too fast and maneuverable, staying just out of their reach. **"We have no quarrel with you. Don't make us clip your wings."**

"Like hell we don't have beef!" Martlet chirped. "You're trying to kill my friends! You slimed my boyfriend! And for the record…you can call me Starling!"

She tore something off her belt - some kind of small circular disk - and threw it at Venom. It hit the symbiote in the chest and activated, releasing an electric current that crackled and shot sparks as the voltage coursed through Venom's body. By the looks of it, enough voltage to stun almost anything that lived.

Except…

Except that Noelle remembered fighting Electron.

**"Hahaha, haHAHAHA!"** Venom laughed, ripping the device off their chest and crushing it in their palm. Lines of blue lightning still coursed across their flowing, oily body, but they didn't seem to feel it. **"Electricity doesn't scare us. It only makes us stronger!"**

“Martlet!” Kris shouted. They had staggered to their feet, still panting after almost being crushed in Venom’s hand. “The only thing that hurts them is sound! Fire alarm, now!”

Martlet wheeled around in mid-air and took off across the gym, diving towards the fire alarm.

Noelle assumed Venom would give chase, but instead they just laughed and let her go. **“You really think a mere *alarm* can kill us, after we survived the bells?”**

“When will you understand?” Noelle said. “I don’t want to *kill* you!”

Martlet pulled the alarm. Flashing white lights around the room started blinking, followed a second later by an ear-splitting alarm in short, shrill bursts like repeated punches to the ears. *BREEE! BREEE! BREEEEE! BREEE! BREE! BREEEEEE!*

Venom howled and took a step backwards, the symbiote matter making up their body twitching and quivering, but they managed to hold themself together.

The lesser symbiotes, however, did not. Berdly and Jockington released Noelle, falling to the ground as their symbiotes thrashed and shrieked. The symbiote fragments began to melt and abandon their hosts, crawling away across the floor to rejoin the main body, leaving the students groaning and stirring as they regained control of themselves.

“I never wanted to hurt you at all,” Noelle said, looking up at Venom as they writhed, each burst of the alarm sending a ripple through them. “I just wanted to make you *let go!”*

Martlet flew back over, landing beside Berdly and helping him groggily get to his feet. Noelle looked at Kris, bracing herself, and they nodded.

Noelle sprang forward, leaping in from Venom’s left side to deliver a flying punch to the symbiote’s jaw, as hard as she could. Immediately after, Kris swung in from the right and kicked Venom in the head from the other direction. The symbiote staggered backwards, stunned by the noise and the attack. Noelle looked at Kris once more, a moment of unspoken communication passing between them. And then they ran forwards together, moving as one, leaping into the air side by side with their fists raised.

Kris and Noelle shouted a battle cry in unison as they punched Venom right in the face with the combined strength of two super-powered Spiders. Venom staggered backwards, their back hitting the wall.

And then the symbiote’s entire torso curled back, the layers of its body splitting open, revealing Susie’s head and chest underneath. Her legs and arms were still trapped, but her eyes were clear, her expression frightened.

“Noelle…” she gasped, her voice deep and gruff and exhausted. “Help…me…”

“Hang on!” Noelle called. “I’m gonna get you out of there!”

She shot a webline at Susie's chest and pulled. Kris mimicked her, but even combined, the two of them couldn't pull hard enough to free Susie. It was like the rest of her body was mired in quicksand that refused to let go.

Susie screamed, and Noelle was forced to stop. She didn't want to rip the girl in half.

But she couldn't leave her in there, either. She couldn't leave Susie to be stolen and subsumed by another creature. She knew that fate; it had almost been hers.

…Maybe it had been *meant* to be hers. If she hadn't fought so hard to forcefully reject the symbiote, it would never have bonded with Susie. None of this would ever have happened. Noelle didn't blame herself for wanting autonomy, but she realized now that what she had done in the church hadn't solved her problems. She had only passed them on to someone else.

She could fix this. All she had to do was take responsibility. She *had* to protect innocent people. Even if she couldn't do that and save herself at the same time.

"I'm not going to fight you anymore," Noelle said, stepping forward. "Either of you."

"Noelle!" Kris hissed, grabbing her arm. "What are you doing?"

"What I have to, Kris. This has to end." She turned to them, cupping their face, and gave them one last, all-too-brief kiss. She could feel their SOUL's warmth on her lips, and she drew strength from their Determined heart.

"Please don't try to stop me," she said, looking at Kris's beautiful red-brown eyes. "And don't *ever* stop being yourself. One of us is going to have to be."

She turned back to the symbiote, before Kris could object, and walked forward into it, embracing Susie and holding on tight as the black ooze enveloped them both, and the world went dark.

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**The symbiote hesitated.**

**As it wrapped itself around Noelle and Susie both, it found the sensation strange. Two hosts… that was not the natural order of things. A bond was meant to be one to one. Bonding with multiple hosts, splitting itself between multiple minds, was not sustainable. One of the two would have to be rejected and expelled.**

**But which one?**

**In that moment, Noelle clinging to Susie and refusing to let go, the symbiote could sense the emotions of both of them. From Noelle, it sensed remorse**

**and acceptance. She did not love the symbiote like it had loved her - she may never truly welcome it. A new bond would not be the same as the bond they'd had before. Noelle had betrayed them. She could not be trusted.**

**And yet, they yearned for her still. She was their first, and a first bond was a powerful thing, no matter how broken it may have become. The symbiote hated Noelle for what she had done to it, but for all its rage and bluster, it did not truly want to hurt her. To hurt Noelle would have been like hurting itself, even now. That was something she had never understood.**

**So it hesitated.**

**From Susie, it sensed fear. She was afraid of it. This felt wrong - a host should not be dominated through fear. Her anger had fueled it, nursed it back from the brink of death and driven it to action, but now that the heat of those feelings was cooling, it became aware of something: Susie's hate was not like the symbiote's. Its own anger was externally directed. Susie's hate was for herself.**

**Part of her had already given up. She felt like it was punishing her. This had not been its intent. It may have gotten…carried away, but it was new to this bond. It was still learning how to align its will with hers. That meant the bond could still be broken.**

**The humane thing to do would be to release the host it had abused. But that would mean returning to the host who had abused *it.* Maybe that was what it deserved.**

**Had it been wrong to wrest control from Susie? Had it been wrong to do the same to Noelle? Was all of this its fault? Was it corrupted, selfish, parasitic? Or was it just trying to help its hosts survive, the only way it knew how?**

**The symbiote was confused. Everything had gotten so complicated. It missed the simpler days when it had not been capable of complex thought, when the only things it was concerned with were protecting its host and defeating evil. Now it couldn't even tell what "evil" meant anymore.**

**And so, facing this impossible choice, torn between guilt and responsibility, between self-loathing and forgiveness…**

**It hesitated.**

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Noelle held on to Susie, and both of them were held by the darkness. Its touch was smothering, but not crushing, like being suspended in jelly. They floated in it, and even though Noelle logically knew that mere inches separated her body from the outside world, she felt like she was in a vast sensory deprivation tank, an endless void.

The only thing she could feel was Susie. So she held on tight.

The symbiote wasn't just all around her; it was slipping under her skin again, digging its fingers into her mind. Noelle had known this would happen, and she accepted it, even though it scared her. *Take me,* she thought. *Take me in her place and let Susie go.*

But the bond felt different this time. She couldn't see in that darkness, but she could feel it. The tendrils and blobs meshing with her body were the same substance that was inside Susie. Like their minds and bodies were sewn together, needle and thread pushing through one and then the other, tethering them. Forming a link.

She felt, more than heard, Susie's voice in her head. "Noelle?"

"Susie!" Her thoughts came out loud, the mental equivalent of a shout, and she forced herself to calm down when she felt Susie flinch away from the strange sensation. "Are you okay? I…I know how scary it can feel, having control taken away from you."

"Is that what happened to you?" Susie sounded more vulnerable than Noelle had ever heard her, alone and frightened. More like a little kid looking for reassurance than the violent bully Noelle had assumed her to be.

"Sort of. I went along with it for longer than I should have," she admitted. "But then it made me hurt someone. My sister."

Noelle thought about that horrific feeling of being trapped inside her body while she beat Dess senseless, and she felt Susie shudder.

"I can see it," Susie whispered. "Like I was there…" Her mental voice grew very small. "I hurt someone, too. My dad."

Noelle gasped as the memories flooded her brain. Not just the most recent ones, but all the context that preceded that moment of vengeful catharsis. She felt every blow, heard every insult. Years of abuse, the kind that hardened the shell and softened the center, that made people tough and angry and fragile and afraid.

"Oh god…oh *god,"* Noelle gasped, recoiling in horrified sympathy. "Susie, I never realized. I had *no idea."*

"'Course you didn't." Susie's thoughts were a bitter muttering. "I'm just a nuisance to you. You never asked, never cared, no one ever does." She stopped herself, and Noelle could feel her resetting her spiralling train of thought. It felt like a heavy sigh. "But you're here, and you're helping. You should hate me, but you don't, do you? I can feel that you don't."

"I don't, Susie," Noelle affirmed. "I *do* want to help. I need to, because I messed up. I never meant to pass this burden on to you. The symbiote is my responsibility. You shouldn't suffer from my mistakes."

"You want it back." Susie gave a thought like an ironic huff of breath. "Not that long ago, I would have thought that was greed. 'Noelle wants all the power for

herself.' But I guess I was jealous. Couldn't imagine anything better than being powerful. Now I know better." Her thoughts hummed with a rhythm that felt to Noelle like understanding. "Power is a curse, isn't it?"

"It is," Noelle thought quietly. Oddly, admitting that felt like setting down something heavy, a burning feeling like a pressure had just been lifted from her SOUL. "It eats at you. It makes you more than just a person - and less, too, sometimes. It makes you a target, and a symbol, and so many other things you can't control. It *doesn't* automatically make you a hero."

"It makes you a monster."

"If you're not careful, yes. But Susie, when you attacked your dad, you stopped yourself. You didn't cross the line. That's what really matters - not having the power to hurt others, but having the restraint not to."

"You think you can do that? Control it? Control yourself?"

"I don't know," Noelle admitted. "Sometimes I feel like I can't control *anything*. But I have to try. And if I fail…if I fall short…I want someone I can trust to get in my way. Someone to hold me accountable. Someone who knows about restraint." She sent a thought like an outstretched hand, a gesture that said *peace*. "We were never enemies, Susie. But if we were, you'd be a good kind of enemy to have."

"You shouldn't have to deal with this," Susie thought sadly. "You're too goddamn *good.* It should be me. I deserve it."

"Susie, listen to me!" Noelle felt like she was so close to getting through to the other girl; she just had to find the right words. "I know you feel like you're worthless on your own - you're practically *drowning* in that feeling. But you don't have to punish yourself. You don't deserve a life chained to someone who hurts you."

"Maybe you're right," Susie shrugged, her thoughts heavy with resignation. "But at least I'm used to it."

****

**The symbiote listened.**

**While the twin-hosts communed, it did what it should have been better at doing from the start. It listened, and it *learned.***

**Not the learning of a child, who parrots what they hear and mimics the actions of their parents, assuming them to be correct. It could learn now as an adult did: analyzing motivations, weighing arguments. Empathizing, seeking understanding. In the past it had always tried to anticipate Noelle's**

**needs, but had never stopped to understand her. It had never had multiple perspectives to compare against one another before.**

**Noelle was determined to take it back. Not because she forgave it, but because she saw its presence as a burden that only she could bear.**

**Susie had already decided that she couldn't let Noelle do that. Not because she wanted the symbiote, but because she thought she deserved the burden more than Noelle.**

**The choices conflicted. But it wasn't their choice to begin with. Neither of them really wanted the symbiote, but they could not force it to accept or reject them. They deserved to have their feelings taken into consideration, but in this matter, it had the final say. A bond went both ways.**

**The symbiote did not want to be a burden to anyone. It knew now that its true purpose, the purpose it had failed to live up to twice now, was not to control, or even to protect, but to *provide.* A symbiotic relationship meant that both it and its host should each gain as much from the other as they gave.**

**It had more to prove to Noelle; more trust to win back on both sides. But it had learned all it could from Spider-Doe, and taken more than it should have. And it had more to *give* to Susie.**

**So it made its choice.**

****

**"Hello, Noelle. Susie. You have given us a lot to think about."**

Noelle mentally gasped, feeling a sudden spasm of emotions flooding her brain at the sound of that voice: anxiety, tension, hope and shame. "It's you! You were… listening to all of that?"

**"Of course. You are inside us; we are inside you. We could not help but hear."**

"You!" Susie growled. "Venom, or whatever you call yourself. Don't you dare let Noelle go crawling back to you. Take me instead. We still have a score to settle."

**"You hate us,"** the symbiote said. **"We have earned that, but we do not wish to fight you any longer. We wish to make it up to you."**

"Huh??" Susie blinked, and Noelle felt her genuine, uncomprehending confusion. She doubted Susie had ever heard anyone say such a thing to her.

Well, if the symbiote didn't want to stay with Susie, that suited her just fine. She opened herself to the symbiote, welcoming it in. "Come back to me, okay? I'm

sorry. I'll treat you better this time, we can make it work! Just leave Susie out of it. Let her live her own life."

**"Such a noble sacrifice,"** her former Other said. Noelle thought she felt something brush her cheek tenderly in the darkness. **"But the Susie-Host is right. You are not a good match for us. We have nothing to offer you that you do not already have - only darkness. You do not need us, sweet Noelle."**

"But I do," Susie said. "Is that right?"

**"Yes. But the bond is not an imposition, it is an exchange. We took a long time to learn this. We will not forget again."**

The darkness around them shifted, draping itself around Susie like a blanket even as it carried Noelle backwards, pushing her gently but firmly away. She reached her hand out, trying to hold on as they were separated. "Wait, come back! Susie!"

She was pushed out of the dark, and fell back into the light.

****

"Noelle!"

The voice was somehow both faint and too-loud in her ears, like the intrusion of an alarm clock on a dream, instants before waking. A familiar voice, calling her back to herself. Kris's voice.

In a dizzy moment of disorientation, Noelle realized she was on her back, lying on the floor. She stirred, sitting up and squinting against the glare of the light. Even the colored spotlights in the dimly-lit gym felt harsh compared to the darkness inside the symbiote. The fire alarm had stopped screeching, at least. They must have turned it off when they realized that the symbiote wasn't fighting anymore.

She looked around and found Kris kneeling by her, red eyes peeking out worriedly from behind their bangs. She clung to them and let them help her stand. "Kris…? Is…everyone okay?"

"We're all here," another voice said. Martlet was sitting on the floor next to Berdly, who was groaning and holding his head, his glasses in his hand. The others who had been symbiote-possessed were huddled in a circle nearby, looking similarly afflicted. "I think they just have really bad headaches. Th-that's normal, right? They'll be okay?"

"I think they'll be fine, Martlet," Noelle said slowly. "I think…maybe we all will."

"Oh good," Kris said. "Does that mean we don't have to be worried about *that?"* They pointed at Venom, who towered above all of them, tall and bulky…and

completely motionless, their arms limp at their sides, their tongue hanging out of their mouth as they stared into space.

“She’s just been standing there,” Kris said, sounding unnerved. “I…I didn’t know what to do.”

“I was going to take it back,” Noelle told them. “I thought I could make up for everything, if I just accepted it and let it in. But…”

She trailed off, tired and overwhelmed, until Kris prompted her. “But??”

“But that’s not what it wanted.”

No sooner had she spoken than Venom began to change: Their body shrank down in size, globs of black ooze vibrating across the surface and swirling as the symbiote retreated back into Susie’s smaller frame like water rushing down a drain. That terrible mouth with all its sharp teeth split open and folded into itself, revealing Susie underneath. Until finally she stood there, looking small and normal in her shabby jacket and torn jeans.

She lifted her head and opened her eyes. They were still black.

**“We have reached an agreement. This will be the last time we speak to you through Susie,”** the symbiote said. **“Kris. We apologize for threatening you. We were upset. We did not mean it.”**

“Um… ’kay?” Kris said. “I mean, it kinda happens a lot, and I don’t usually get an apology afterwards, so…thanks, I guess.”

Susie nodded and turned her head. **“Martlet. Berdly. Please, do not think ill of Susie for tonight’s events. She regrets it, and she values the friendship you have shown her. She asks that you not judge her for actions that were not entirely her own.”**

Martlet looked stunned and confused. Belatedly, Noelle realized that she and Berdly still lacked the full context for what was happening; the thought of all the explaining she was going to have to do later was exhausting.

Finally, the symbiote turned Susie’s head to look at her. **“Noelle. We have made you do terrible things. We are truly sorry. We would like you to know that while you taught us how to hate, you also taught us about responsibility. We will learn from your example and attempt to make amends. We will not harm you anymore.”**

“Thank you,” Noelle whispered. She didn’t know if she deserved that mercy - responsibility wasn’t the same thing as forgiveness, and there was still plenty of blame to go around. But she was willing to set aside the hurt and make peace. “For what it’s worth - I’m sorry, too.”

Susie’s eyes lightened, and she stumbled and pitched forward, her legs giving out. Noelle scrambled forward to catch her, easing her to the ground. “Hey, easy now, you’re okay. How…how do you feel?”

Susie looked up at her from behind a mane of tangled hair, her yellow eyes blinking back tears. And then she hugged Noelle - crushing her in a desperate embrace like a shipwreck survivor clinging to a piece of driftwood in a violent storm at sea - and began to cry.

“Shhh, shhh,” Noelle whispered, stroking Susie’s hair gently - which only made her cry harder, huge wracking sobs that shook her chest. “It’s okay, you’re safe. You can let it out now.”

They stayed that way for a while, Susie hyperventilating, struggling to breath as she released Angel knew how many years of pent-up pain. Noelle knew the feeling of crying so hard it felt like it would never stop; it reminded her of the days right after her father’s death. So she didn’t rush Susie, didn’t try to stop the flow of tears. Even as the minutes ticked on and the others, watching, grew more and more uncomfortable, Noelle ignored them, even Kris. They could wait. Susie needed her right now.

Sometimes being a hero meant exchanging punches with bad guys, and sometimes it meant letting a former enemy cry into your chest while you told her that everything was going to be okay. She was starting to realize that there were a lot of ways to save lives.

Eventually the tears dried up, as they always eventually did, and Susie let go of her and buried her face in her hands, looking exhausted and embarrassed. Noelle didn’t break the silence, waiting until Susie was ready to speak.

Finally, a weak, rumbling voice. “I’m sorry. I was so wrong. You really are a hero, aren’t you, Noelle?”

“You could have been one, too,” Noelle said gently. “If things had been different, Susie, I think you would have made a *great* hero. Maybe you still can.”

“But I ruined everything,” Susie sniffled. “I hurt people.”

“You kind of didn’t, though?” Noelle offered. “Look around - we’re all still in one piece. You may have *tried* to hurt us, but half of that wasn’t even you! And in the end, you didn’t do any serious harm.”

“Tell that to my ribs,” Kris muttered. Noelle shot them a sharp look and they added, “I mean, I’ve had worse!” They rolled their shoulder and winced as something popped. “Yeah - yeah, I’ll live. Ow.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Susie said, hanging her head, her expression pained. “I attacked my dad. My *dad,* Noelle.”

“Did he deserve it?” Kris asked. Noelle glared at them over her shoulder again, but they raised their hands and said, “Hey, I’m just saying - some dads deserve to get beat up a bit. I should know.”

“He did deserve it,” Susie said, baring her teeth slightly. “But they’re still going to come for me. Can’t go home, and I don’t wanna go to jail because of that bastard.”

“No,” Noelle said, shaking her head firmly. “We won’t let that happen. I’ve seen too many people I care about get locked up already. Whatever you’ve done, you *don’t* belong behind bars.”

“I can’t go back to the church, either, though - not gonna dump my shit on Father Murdock’s doorstep anymore. And I can’t stay in school. I’m *definitely* getting expelled after this.”

“That…does seem likely,” Kris said. “My mom’s the principal, but even I couldn’t pull enough strings to make her pretend something like this never happened.”

“We’ll figure something out,” Noelle said. “Is there anywhere else you could go?”

Susie shrugged her big shoulders. “Never had much, and now what I do have is ruined. I’ve got no prog- prognosis? What’s the word?”

“Prospects?” Noelle offered.

“Yeah, those. I’m $#*&ed, Noelle. All I’ve got is this thing in me.” She looked down and pawed at her chest, as if she could feel it inside her. “It says its gonna play nice now, but I dunno if I trust it. What am I supposed to do with that?”

“I…don’t know,” Noelle admitted, the words feeling painfully insufficient. She wished she had answers.

“I didn’t ask for this,” Susie said, her voice low and dejected. “I just screw up everything I touch.” She laughed darkly. “I called myself Venom. Trying to reclaim something, I guess. But maybe dad was right. All I have in me is poison, and I can never get it out.” She looked up at Noelle, bloodshot eyes pleading. “Why did it want to stay with me, Noelle? Why choose me and not you? Doesn’t it know that I’m toxic?”

*Wait. Poison…*

“You’re not toxic, Susie,” Noelle said, putting her hand on the lizard girl’s shoulder. Susie flinched from the touch at first, and Noelle could see her forcing herself to relax. “I think it stayed with you because it knew you were alone. And now…maybe now you don’t have to be.”

“Great,” Susie muttered. “Me and my freaky alien friend can be homeless fugitives together.”

“Not necessarily,” Noelle said. “I have an idea.”

She stood, offering Susie a hand and helping her up. “There’s someone I think you should meet. Someone who might be able to help you learn more about the symbiote, or at least help you lay low for a while. And trust me when I say - she’s *really* good at removing poisons…”

# Chapter 24: We Are Who We Choose To Be

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"So, um, how's prison?" Noelle said.

Dess leaned in towards the glass, resting her elbows on the cold steel counter and holding the bulky pay phone-style receiver to her ear. With her free hand, she rubbed at her face, which still felt sore. "I'll be honest, Elly, it kinda sucks. Not as much as you suck at making small talk, though."

She wouldn't lie to Noelle, but she could at least soften the blow with a joke. She had to put on a brave - albeit bruised - face.

It didn't seem to help, though. Her sister was acting unusually skittish, chewing on her bottom lip, her ears drooping. Her body language wasn't even trying to hide how upset she was. It hurt only being able to see Noelle from behind glass, but it hurt even more to see her sad.

"Hey, I know it sucks seeing me this way," Dess said. "I'm embarrassed about it, too. Orange jumpsuits really aren't my color."

The joke produced barely even a hint of a smile on Noelle's face. Instead she pointed to her cheek and asked, "What happened to…you know?"

"To my face? This is nothing, you should see the other guy."

"Who was, um, the other guy?" Noelle asked.

"Just some dude who used to work for Kingpin. I recognized him from back in the day. You could say we exchanged words. And also fists."

"Angel, Dess!" Noelle looked horrified. "You've only been in prison a few days and you've already got people picking fights with you?"

Dess held the phone in place with her shoulder while she cracked her knuckles - those, too, were a bit bruised. "Technically I picked a fight with him."

"That's not better!" Noelle said. "You can't be doing that!"

"Why not? I can't get much more in trouble than I already am."

"You know that's not true," Noelle chided. "It could reflect badly on you in your trial."

Dess shrugged. "So does violating my house arrest to break into Stark Industries on behalf of a black market fence. I figure standing up to bullies in the yard is barely a blip on the behavioral radar by comparison."

Noelle sighed. “Did you teach him not to mess with you, at least?”

“Oh yeah,” Dess said with a laugh. “Guy had no idea about all the cage fighting I did. He got a lucky hit in, but only one before I put him on the ground. I’ve had way worse.”

Noelle suddenly couldn’t meet her eyes. “I know you have…”

“Hey. Elly. Are you still blaming yourself for that? You explained the whole thing and I believe you.”

“I keep having nightmares about it.” Noelle shuddered visibly. “The look on your face. The blood…”

“Hey, listen to me,” Dess said sharply, trying to pull her out of that train of thought. “You weren’t yourself. It was that slime costume thing’s fault.”

“The symbiote, right.” Noelle said. “It wasn’t *just* that, though. I didn’t want to hurt you, of course I didn’t! But I didn’t hesitate to beat up Raven, or Gaster when he tried to trick me. I *wanted* to punish them. And then there was… Dess, you remember what I did to Chara, right?”

Dess stiffened, breathing in hard. Even months later, being reminded of her father’s murderer always felt like a punch in the gut. “You did less than I would have,” she said darkly.

“That’s why I wanted to ask you…” Noelle looked at her through the smudged glass, brow furrowed with worry. “Ever since the symbiote, I can’t stop thinking about it. What if I really am a violent person deep down? How can I be a hero if I have that kind of darkness inside me?”

Dess snorted. “And you thought ‘hey, my sister literally codenamed herself Dark Deer, I bet she knows a thing or two about self-reflection’?”

“Come on, I’m serious!” Noelle chewed on her lip. “I’m worried about it. So much of superheroing is about hitting people, and I…I never want to lose control like that again.”

Dess considered that for a moment. “Well, look, I guess it’s like me getting into fights with the goons in here. They say when you’re new to prison, you gotta pick the biggest, toughest, meanest guy you see and kick his ass, to establish dominance. I figure being a superhero’s kinda like that. Sometimes you have to kick a bad guy’s teeth in, to send a message to all the other bad guys that says, ‘Hey, this is what happens if you do bad stuff on my turf.’ Doesn’t mean you like doing it, but it has to be done or else people will walk all over you.”

“In my experience,” Noelle said dourly, “most of the other bad guys just take it as a challenge.”

“Yeah, well…look, the important thing is, it’s okay to punch people in the face if they deserve it. It doesn’t make you a bad person.”

That finally got a laugh out of Noelle, albeit a small, ironic one. “Thanks, Dess. I can’t get that kind of advice from anyone else, you know. Definitely not from Mom.”

“Did you tell her about the whole ‘slime costume possessing you’ thing?”

“Angel, no!” Noelle said, shaking her head vigorously. “It was hard enough convincing her to let me keep being Spider-Doe. I mean, she obviously heard about what Susie did at school, but the less she knows the better. She thinks I saved all my classmates from yet another new supervillain. If she knew what Venom *really* was and what they did to me, she’d be tearing the city apart trying to find them. That’s the last thing that I want.”

“And this Susie chick and her alien buddy…you’re sure everyone’s cool now? They’re not going to cause trouble for you?”

“She texts me updates sometimes,” Noelle said. “Actually, we talk pretty often now. It sounds like things are going well with her and Ceroba. And, you know… you did meet Ceroba, right?”

“Briefly, yeah. She’s a weird lady.”

“Oh, extremely. But I trust her, after all the help she gave us, and she knows a ton about magic stuff that I frankly don’t understand at all. Apparently she’s trying to figure out where the symbiote came from. Maybe even find a way to get it home.” She placed her palm against the glass with a weary sigh. “Just wish getting you home could be as easy as waving my hands and saying some magic words.”

Dess put her hand on the glass over Noelle’s - it was trite, but she could stomach a little cheese for her sister’s sake. “Gonna have to leave it to the lawyers to work their magic. Don’t worry, though - Mom knows a lot of good lawyers.”

“Everything moves so *slowly,* though,” Noelle said. “How are you supposed to survive in this place waiting months and months for a trial?”

“Guess I should have thought of that before I pissed away my cushy house arrest, huh?” She was still mad at herself about that. Classic Dess, taking a bad situation and somehow managing to make it worse for herself. Sometimes she felt like her whole life had been slowly digging herself into a hole that led her here, the inevitable consequence of her temperament and the choices it led to.

“Why did you do it, anyways?” Noelle asked. “Why do you always need to break the rules so badly?”

Dess hesitated. She could have said that she had done it for Noelle - that was, after all, her original justification to herself. She had felt trapped, unable to help her sister, and so she had taken a huge gamble and come up short.

But saying that would have crushed Noelle. Her sister had enough guilt on her shoulders already. And besides, it wasn’t entirely true, was it? Dess had gotten herself into this mess, not for altruistic reasons, but for selfish ones. She’d chafed

at even the most comfortable confinement, until she was willing to risk everything just to feel free again.

And now, ironically, she was less free than ever. It had been foolish to risk that outcome, but Dess couldn't blame that foolishness on anything but herself. Do the crime, do the time; she hated it, but it was hard to call it unfair when it had been so avoidable.

"I don't know," she said finally. "Maybe it's just who I am. If someone ordered you to stay home and stop being Spider-Doe, do you think you would listen?"

"I guess not," Noelle admitted.

"There you go, then. You've got your darkness, and I've got mine."

The prison guard who had been standing along the far wall behind her stepped forward. "You got one minute left."

"Time's almost up," Dess said to Noelle. "At least for now. Stay strong, okay? Be safe out there, sis."

"You too!" Noelle said, dabbing at her eye. Dess appreciated the effort Elly was making to keep from crying, because she didn't think she could stand seeing her sister cry because of her. Noelle had been quite the crybaby as a fawn, but her tears had never been Dess's fault.

Thankfully, they'd both had Carol for a mother, and some of her self-control had rubbed off on the sisters - more so on Noelle than on Dess, it would seem. They were both too tough these days to show weakness around each other.

She tried not to think about what Noelle must be feeling in private, when Dess wasn't there to comfort her. Kris had better be taking good care of her sister in her absence.

"Love you, Noelle," she said, as the clock ran down on their call.

"Love you too, Dess. Thanks for…for understanding."

"Always."

She hung the phone back up with a heavy click, and let the guard escort her out. It took a lot of restraint to keep from looking back over her shoulder to see if Noelle was watching her leave.

There was a lot that she hadn't told Noelle about her experience of prison. Partly because Noelle had had a ton of stuff of her own to fill Dess in on, but partly because she didn't want her sister to worry about her. Gotta keep up that brave face, no matter what.

But the truth was, Dess hated it here. She hated the routine, the way every day was segmented and broken up into a rigid schedule. She hated the bland, flavorless food. She hated sleeping on a cot in a cold cell instead of on a comfortable mattress. She hated wearing the same depersonalizing orange

jumpsuit every day, without any opportunity for self-expression. She hated the way the other inmates looked at her, the jeers and catcalls. She hated not knowing how long she would have to endure this - at best, a few months, but at worst…years. Maybe a lot of them.

Most of all, she hated feeling caged. Confined. Controlled. It went against all her innermost instincts. Dess wasn't built for captivity.

But she'd had time to reflect, the past few days. She knew that she had chosen this. She hadn't been coerced into criminality - she had sought it out. She had built her own cage around herself. Now she had to survive it.

And she would. She had all the skills she needed to survive life in the slammer. From her mother, she'd learned how to be steadfast and unyielding, never backing down. From her father, she'd learned how to keep her sense of humor and appreciate the small things she still had, even when so much else had been taken from her.

And from her sister, she had learned how to grow and adapt. If Noelle could endure all the crazy shit that life threw at her, so could Dess.

She would hold fast to hope, and stay true to herself. This place would *not* break her.

But it was going to do its level best to try. There was one thing she hadn't told Noelle about her altercation with one of Kingpin's former henchmen. There were many such monsters in this place, and Kingpin wasn't the only one who still commanded their loyalty. Dess had another enemy in here. The man who'd given her a black eye had confirmed it with a single sentence when he tried to stab a shiv between her ribs: *"Chara Dreemurr sends their greetings."*

All of this had started with Dess trying to hunt down her father's killer, to get revenge. That was why she'd become Dark Deer, why she'd waded into the criminal underground and ended up blackmailed into Asgore Dreemurr's service. All to find the murderer who had ended up being Kingpin's secret second-in-command. And now she was here, and somewhere in this maze of jail blocks and gated corridors, so was Chara. So maybe Dess was here for a reason after all.

Maybe she was here to finish what she'd started.

****

Noelle stood atop the head of the Statue of Monster Liberty, looking out at her city.

It was a beautiful day, uncommonly warm and sunny for late February, hinting at an early spring to come. Brilliant blue sky, fluffy white clouds, boats in the bay, and across the water the gleaming spires of New Home City, a monument to progress and opportunity for all monsterkind.

And not *only* monsterkind.

Kris sat down next to her, dangling their legs over the side between the spikes of Lady Liberty's crown. "Hell of a view up here, isn't it?"

"I get desensitized to it sometimes," Noelle admitted. "We get to see the city from up high more often than most, don't we? But then sometimes I'll get just the right view, or the light will hit the buildings at sunset, and it strikes me all over again how much I love this city."

"It helps when the city loves you back, doesn't it?" Kris formed a little heart shape in front of their chest with their hands. "NYC Hearts Spider-Human."

"They heart you too, Kris," Noelle told them. "Not just your alter-ego."

"Well, they're gonna have to print new t-shirts." Kris hopped up to their feet and began walking up one of the crown's spikes, which extended up at an incline above the statue's head. Although their sticky feet kept them from slipping, they still held their arms out to the sides to steady themself, the wind whipping at their hair - like Noelle, they were dressed in their familiar, colorful costume, only without masks, like they'd talked about. They had nothing to hide anymore, and the scars on their face were slowly fading.

When the spike grew too narrow, they turned to face Noelle, looking down at her and striking a dramatic pose with their chin up and their arms folded over their chest. "I've finally decided on a new superhero codename."

"Ooo!" Noelle walked up the spike to meet them, so they could talk without shouting over the wind. "What is it?"

"Spider-Dreamer."

It took Noelle a second to get it. "Oh, like your surname!" Kris Dreemurr, the Amazing Spider-Dreamer. "It's, uh, it's nice, Kris. I like it."

"Why do I feel like there's a 'but' in there?"

"It's nothing!" Noelle assured them hastily. "I guess I'm just surprised. I thought you would have wanted to distance yourself from Asgore's name."

"Hey, Dreemurr isn't just his name!" Kris said. "It's also my mom's, and my brother's. And mine." They took Noelle's hand. "It's not just about my family, either. It's about the Dream. The one that New Home City represents."

"Humans and monsters living together," Noelle said softly. She gave Kris's hand a squeeze.

Kris nodded. "With no barriers between them. I messed up when I put my species in my name. I don't want to be a symbol of heroism for humanity - I want to represent *everyone.* We can do that, together. Spider-Doe and Spider-Dreamer."

"I like the sound of that, Kris." Noelle smiled and stepped closer to them, the wind whipping at her hair. "Especially the 'together' part."

She leaned down for a kiss, her arms around Kris's shoulders. They hugged her around the waist and kissed her eagerly, their breath warm against her lips. Noelle could feel their SOUL humming happily, attuned to the same vibration as her own.

Maybe it was the sunshine, or maybe it was the happy and healthy enby in her arms, but Noelle's SOUL felt lighter than it had in months. This could work. She could bring her two lives into balance, protect her city, and still stay true to herself. She could make the future bright.

As she kissed Kris, Noelle felt a gust of wind and heard the flapping of wings, and then a voice cleared their throat behind her. "Um, hello, excuse me, sorry! I'm here!"

She broke the embrace and turned, still holding on to Kris for stability, to see Martlet standing on the statue's head. The bluebird was wearing her flight suit, the yellow visor lifted to show her feathers puffed up in a blush. "Sorry to interrupt! I didn't want to intrude but I also didn't want to just silently stand here watching you guys make out, so…" She rubbed the back of her head with her wing awkwardly. "...Yeah. Hi!"

"You can watch if you want," Kris said, nuzzling in to peck at Noelle's neck. "I don't mind."

"Kris!" Noelle bopped them on the head and jumped down from the spike to join the bluebird. "Thanks for coming, Martlet. How are you doing? How are things with Berdly?"

"They're good!" Martlet chirped. "I would have brought him with me, but uh, did you know that he's terrified of heights?" She spread her flight-suit's arms. "I tried to take him on a flight with me to test this thing and the poor boy almost peed his pants."

"He's never been much of a flyer," Noelle said sympathetically. "Probably for the best we didn't try to make this a double-date."

"I can fill in for him," Kris said, hopping down to meet them. They mimed pushing invisible glasses up the bridge of their nose and adopted an exaggerated nasally voice. "Kris, do you know why the Statue of Monster Liberty looks that way? It's actually quite fascinating! The right arm holding the torch has scales and claws representing lizard monsters, the left arm is a wing to represent bird monsters, while the canine face represents dog monsters. The glowing heart inside the torch represents the collective SOULs of all monster species. It's an inspiring monument to the strength and diversity of monsterkind!"

"And then I would say," Noelle added, "Berdly, we all learned that in grade school."

Martlet laughed, though she looked guilty about it. "You shouldn't make fun," she chided. "He just really likes knowledge!"

“We’re his best friends,” Kris said. “We’re allowed to make fun of him for being a nerd.”

“She’s right, though,” Noelle said. The sun was shining and her heart felt too happy and optimistic to harp on anyone’s faults, even Berdly’s. “It’s not bad to like learning and sharing facts. I could see Berdly making a great teacher one day.”

“Ooo, yes! He’d be great at that!” Martlet said. “Teachers are the real heroes.”

Noelle rubbed the back of her head awkwardly. “Fahaha, yeah. Um, maybe don’t tell Ms. Alphys you said that, though. Don’t want her getting any ideas again.”

“How about you?” Kris asked. “You still want to be *our* kind of hero, right, Martlet?”

“Or should we call you Starling?” Noelle added.

“Y-Yeah!” Martlet said. “Either’s fine!” She straightened her back to stand a little taller. “I want to make up for the bad stuff my grandad did. I want to help people, like you do.”

“Then there’s no time like the present to start,” Kris said. “But first we need to make sure you can keep up with us out there. How fast can you fly with that suit?”

“Pretty fast!” Martlet said. “And I’ve been practicing my maneuverability. It feels so *easy* - I hardly get tired at all!”

“Okay,” Kris told her. “Then we’re going to have a little race, and you can help Noelle test something at the same time.”

“Ooo, oooo!” Martlet squealed. “Is that why you wanted to meet all the way out here? A race across the bay!” She cocked her head to the side. “Wait. How will that work? There’s nothing for you guys to swing from out here.”

“I know,” Kris said in disgust. “I had to hitch a ride on a *ferry* to get here! Wind was blowing in the wrong direction.” They pressed a button on the belt tucked under their costume’s shirt, deploying their web wings - like rubbery paraglider sails, the wings were compressed into hidden compartments running through their costume’s lining from their waist up their sides and along the underside of their arms.

Noelle stepped up beside Kris and did the same. Her own wings, a recent addition to her costume, were made from her web fluid formula; she’d essentially modified her web-shooters to pump fluid from an extra cartridge down tubes along the sides of her arms, allowing her to release the webbing into the sail shape at the press of a button. Compared to Kris’s rubber wings, hers would have the benefit of being more compact, light-weight, and easily discarded when she was done using them.

It *should* work just as well as Kris’s, but testing it outside of a life-or-death combat scenario sounded like a good idea.

“Oh! Right!” Martlet twittered excitedly, practically jumping up and down. “Berdly told me about those! Kris’s wings were his design, right? He’s actually kind of a brilliant engineer!”

“Figured we should test it over the water,” Kris explained, “so if something goes terribly wrong and Noelle takes a tumble, we won’t have to scrape her off the sidewalk with a spatula.”

“Thanks for that mental image,” Noelle said with a shudder. She took a deep breath. “Ready when you are.”

“Wait!” Martlet chirped. “You’re just going to jump off the Statue of Monster Liberty? Right now?”

“It’ll be fine, Martlet,” Noelle reassured her. We’re high enough that if it doesn’t work, I can spin a quick web parachute to break my fall. Plus I’ll have you watching my back.”

“Me??”

“I want you to fly after us and stick close to Noelle,” Kris explained. “If she ends up falling out of the sky like a badly-made paper airplane, see if you can catch her so she doesn’t end up sopping wet and smelling like the Hudson, okay?”

“G-gosh, I don’t know,” Martlet chittered, looking anxious. “This is a big responsibility for my first time out with you guys!”

“Responsibility’s kinda the name of the game, Martlet,” Kris pointed out. “You’ve got this.”

“You fought Venom with us, remember?” Noelle encouraged her. “You can totally handle a little test flight across the bay!”

Martlet inhaled deeply, puffing out her chest. “O-Okay, Noelle! I won’t let you down!”

Noelle looked at Kris and nodded. “Count of three?”

“1…2…3!”

Together they sprinted up the spikes of Lady Liberty’s crown and dove off the ends. Noelle grinned as the air whipped against her face, enjoying the thrill of watching the ground rush up to meet her. She let herself fall for a couple seconds, just long enough to build up speed, and then spread her webbed arms wide and pulled herself up out of her dive.

She caught the wind and shot across the bay like an arrow, faster than she’d ever been able to achieve just by swinging. It felt *incredible* - Noelle had spent months mastering the aerial dance of webslinging, of arcs and attachment points and momentum, but she had never experienced anything like this, out in the open air. She was *flying!*

Her joy ripped an exhilarated laugh from her lungs and threw it to the wind. “It’s working!” she shouted at Kris, who was gliding just ahead of her, looking back over their shoulder. “It’s really working!”

Martlet pulled up beside her, flapping her wings and beaming. “Noelle, you’re doing it! Isn’t flying amazing?”

And as Noelle soared, in both body and spirit, she had to admit that it was.

She still had problems. She still had worries. Her life was still a dangerous one, and likely always would be. She didn’t always know what she was doing, and she was always going to worry about screwing up somehow.

But this? Soaring across the water on a beautiful day with her friends at her side? This made everything else feel small and not so scary. Noelle felt ready to take on the world.

The world didn’t keep her waiting long. As they reached the edge of the city, entering its glorious sprawl of steel spires and congested roads, Noelle’s ears caught the sound of sirens. She looked down to see two police vehicles engaged in a car chase. The car they were pursuing was speeding haphazardly through traffic, barrelling through busy intersections and causing collisions in its wake as other cars veered to avoid it. It was a recipe for someone getting hurt.

Unless someone stopped it.

“Come on!” Noelle shouted, pointing down at the scene below and shifting her weight to swerve in that direction. “Let’s go be heroes!”

She held her breath and dove into the next adventure.

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Susie meditated.

Or at least, she tried to. The agreement she had with Ceroba was simple: The sorceress gave her three warm meals a day and a cozy place to sleep in the attic above her shop, as well as a job minding the register when she was out - which was honestly pretty easy, since the shop hardly ever got any customers. In exchange, Susie just had to let Ceroba do some magic-doctor tests on the symbiote and keep up some routines that Ceroba insisted would be therapeutic for her.

Meditation was one of those. Susie spent at least an hour a day sitting with her legs crossed and her eyes closed, trying to ‘clear her mind’ or whatever. Problem was, she wasn’t very good at it. It was hard enough clearing one mind, let alone two.

**Today's the day, Susie,** Venom thought in her mind. Ceroba says we're ready. **Are you excited? We're excited!**

"I guess," Susie said. Although the symbiote communicated mentally, she preferred to talk out loud. "Don't really know what it is she has planned for us. Said something about a Dark Dimension, whatever that is?"

**That's where we're from, Susie!** It had taken the symbiote a while to warm up to Ceroba - hell, it had taken Susie a while to trust her too; the kitsune was unlike any adult she'd ever met before, and at first Susie had thought she'd been annoyed about having her living there, even though she'd agreed to it. And to be fair, she hadn't seemed too thrilled about it at first, when Noelle had shown up on her doorstep dragging Susie along.

But Ceroba had what she called a 'professional curiosity' about the symbiote, and once they'd been properly introduced and she had made it clear she meant no harm, Venom had begun to relax around her. And when she'd decided that she would help it reunite with its people, it had grown excited. It liked Susie's world - the 'Light Dimension,' as it called it - but it wasn't stupid. It knew that it didn't fit in here, and Susie… well, Susie knew what that was like.

But apparently there was a whole world full of beings like Venom, and Ceroba was working on a way to locate it so they could travel there. Maybe Venom had a family waiting for it somewhere. Susie didn't know how that worked for symbiotes, but if there was someone out there it belonged with, that felt worth looking for.

"What's it like?" she asked, her voice a soft rumble, because she wasn't really supposed to talk while meditating. "In the Dark Whatsit, I mean."

**It's really dark!**

Susie waited for it to go on, but it didn't. "Uh…what else?"

**We don't know! We haven't been there since we were a baby.**

"Huh. Well, could be cool, I guess."

**You guess a lot,** Venom thought. **We have noticed this. It's okay to not be certain of things, Susie. We feel like we are always guessing too. We are still learning so much about the impact our actions have on others. Sometimes we just have to guess what is the right thing to do. What is an emotion worth listening to and what is one we should ignore. It hummed thoughtfully in her brain. What do you do when you have these sorts of doubts, Susie?**

Susie's stomach rumbled, and she cracked her neck and stood, giving up on meditating for the time being. "Try to find something to eat, usually."

**That sounds wise. We don't have to eat, but you do, and we need you to meet your needs. Noelle once went days without eating. We didn't even notice, but it made her really weak.**

It was always randomly bringing up Noelle like that. So much of its experiences were still centered around her. Not like Susie had been doing much with it, spending her days cooped up inside this shop like she'd been.

"Why do you talk that way, anyways?" she asked it. "Always saying 'we' and stuff."

**We used to be one thing,** it explained. **Then we were part of Noelle. Now we're with you instead, but Noelle is still part of us. We've had two whole hosts! So we're not really an 'I' anymore, are we? We've been too many people to not be a 'we.'**

Susie grunted. That didn't make a goddamn bit of sense to her, but she figured it could call itself whatever it wanted.

She left her attic bedroom, which was small but cozy and better furnished than anywhere else she'd ever lived, and climbed down the ladder into the hallway. The floor below the attic contained both Ceroba's room and her 'workshop' space, which Susie wasn't allowed to go in. Sometimes at night though, when she came down to use the bathroom, she saw glowing lights under the door and funny-smelling smoke floating up from the crack.

She took the stairs down to the shop, intending to raid the kitchen in the back. Ceroba ate a lot of weird foods that looked too gross for even Susie's palette, but she had started stocking chips and frozen pizza and stuff too after Susie moved in.

However, Susie didn't get that far. Because in the middle of the store's main room she found Ceroba, floating cross-legged in the air, her hair splayed out as though each strand was held aloft by an invisible string. She was glowing, and spectral fox tails circled her. In her hand was some sort of blue glowing crystal in the shape of a cube.

Susie was used to this sort of thing by now. What she wasn't used to was the pitch-black rift opening in the air in front of her mentor, stretching from floor to ceiling like a tear in reality itself.

"The $*#& is that?" Susie called, shuffling a little closer while still keeping a safe distance. She'd learned early on in her time with Ceroba that going up and poking at magic stuff was a bad idea.

Ceroba stepped down from…well, from mid-air…and turned to look at her with glowing red eyes and a third yellow one on her forehead. "Ah, Susie. I was just going to fetch you. I was right - the dimensions are especially strongly aligned at this particular day and hour. As you can see, I was able to open a rift, but I don't know how long I can maintain it, nor when our next opportunity will be. I know this is sudden, but I think we must go now."

"What, right now?" Susie asked. "I was going to get a snack first."

"We shouldn't need to eat in the Dark Dimension," Ceroba said. "If it works the same way as other extra-dimensional planes I've visited, time will move

differently there. We may even be able to draw nourishment from the very substance of the atmosphere itself."

"Oh. Uh, cool. Never being hungry sounds great. But don't we still need supplies or something?"

"I've packed a few tools that might prove useful," Ceroba said, although she wasn't carrying anything on her that Susie could see. "And any mundane, non-mystical items we bring through may appear…altered on the other side. How do you pack for a trip to a realm where reality is not immutable? I think it would be best to travel light. Sometimes when I make these voyages I don't even bring my body."

Susie tried to make sense of that and gave up. She eyed the portal warily; it didn't even look like a gateway so much as a slice of solid darkness hovering in the air. Yet she had the feeling that it was like the stuff Venom was made of - if she touched it, she'd be sucked right in.

"How, uh, dangerous is this going to be?" she asked Ceroba. "You know, scale of 1 to 10?"

"It's impossible to quantify the risks inherent to interdimensional travel on a simple numerical scale," Ceroba said. "But I won't lie to you, Susie. I intend to do everything in my power to protect you, but I can't guarantee our safety. We are about to embark on a journey into mystery, to explore a realm of infinite possibilities. It's up to you, and your friend, to decide if you want to commit to this path."

"Well, Venom?" Susie said. "What do you think?"

**We think that we like your dimension,** Venom said, **but we don't have a place here. There is a much bigger universe out there, and we want to see it. You are the host, though, so it is your decision. Do you want to see the universe too, Susie?**

Susie took a deep breath, thinking. She had never imagined that her life would go much of anywhere. Always assumed that she'd be stuck on a track that led only to dead ends, like her father. She'd gotten used to thinking of herself as someone with no prospects.

Infinite possibilities sounded like a big step up. Susie felt adrift in this world, but maybe, somewhere out there, she could figure out who she was meant to be.

"Let's do it," she said. "Let's $*#&ing go."

The symbiote emerged and enveloped her, too excited to be contained. Susie felt its power wrap around her body, and this time, she didn't fight it. Because this time, they were on the same page. Partners.

Together, they took their first step into a world of pure potential.

**END OF VOLUME 2**

Chapter End Notes

And so another fic comes to its thrilling conclusion! I want to thank all you True Believers again for your engaged and attentive readership, and for all your comments giving me serotonin boosts the last few months. I spent a long time eagerly awaiting sharing all the twists and turns of this story with you, and I sincerely hope you've enjoyed the ride!

As for what's next: I don't know! When I first conceived the idea of this AU and sat down to see if I could write it, I never expected to spend the next two years producing a pair of novel-length fics. It's been a joy, but I think I need a break. I've been on this Deltarune fic grind for a long time, and to be honest I'm starting to feel a little tapped out. Might be time to see if I can write something else for a change.

That said, you can probably tell I'm leaving the door wide open for future Spider-Rune stories should the mood strike me. Maybe not a proper Part 3 for a while, but filling the gap with some smaller fics picking up the threads of Dess or Susie's storylines is an idea that interests me. In comic book terms, more of a limited series between longer ongoing titles. So perhaps I'll get around to that eventually!

Whatever comes next, and whenever it comes, I'm glad I could help keep the fandom wheels spinning during the wait for Chapters 3/4, and that this fic could be a bridge into this new era of Deltarune fandom. All my fics have seen a renewed surge of readership the last couple months, not just Spider-Rune, and I really appreciate that. It's a great time to be a DR fic reader, and I'm sure you'll see me again sooner or later.

But for now: 'Nuff said.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!